

Frienemies With Benefits by xSpookyxSpicex

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Summary:

After a game of seven minutes in heaven takes an unexpected turn, Steve finds himself involved in an unusual relationship with Billy, leading him through a path of sexual exploration and a lesson in understanding.

1. Seven Minutes in Heaven

Steve did not like Billy. He knew from the moment they met that he did not like him, though he could never tell whether it was because the prick was an annoyance or a threat. After enough teases, taunts, pushes, and punches, he became more to him than someone that he simply did not like. Steve fucking *hated* Billy. He hated his stupid hair, his stupid jeans, his stupid car, his stupid music, his stupid smirk, and his stupid tongue.

Fuck that tongue!

Naturally, he wasn't entirely thrilled to see him at Tommy Hill's party. It was New Year's Eve. Steve had already downed enough beer to make his head spin and moved on to the next when he saw Nancy Wheeler in Jonathan Byers' arms. He wasn't surprised to see Billy Hargrove digging into the fridge, but he chose to at least try to ignore him. This task, however, proved to be easier said than done.

Billy turned to face Steve. It wasn't the younger boy's presence alone that startled him, but the angry red patch surrounding his bottom lip, which looked as if it had been sliced open with a rusted knife. Steve remembered getting into that godawful fight Billy less than two months ago, but did not remember hitting him that bad.

"What are you looking at, pretty boy?"

"N-nothing," Steve managed to say. "Just getting something to drink."

A smirk played at the corner of Billy's fat lip before he held up two bottles of beer. Steve took one and walked away, ignoring the young punk's wicked grin and wriggling tongue.

At precisely three hours until midnight, some bright spark had proposed a game of seven minutes in heaven and Steve was just tipsy enough to agree to play. Jonathan Byers was the first to spin the bottle and was fortunate enough to have it land on Nancy Wheeler. *Of course*, Steve thought, but said nothing. They went home as soon as their seven minutes were up, much to Steve's discontent. Tommy

Hill was the next to spin the bottle, which landed on Christine Black. *Have fun cutting your tongue on those braces, asshole.* Neither of them spoke of what happened and both spent the rest of the night drinking. Finally, it was Steve's turn. Although he hadn't believed in prayer since he was ten, he prayed as hard as he could that the empty wine bottle would at least land on someone beautiful.

It had landed on Billy Hargrove.

Steve was rendered speechless, as he and the other boy's eyes met. Billy seemed to ignore the boy simulating fellatio on one side and the girl's evident disgust on the other. Instead, he jumped to his feet, motioned Steve to do likewise, and lead him to the nearest closet. Steve seemed to have no other choice but to follow. Wolf whistles and catcalls echoed through the room, followed by many a crude gesture and comment. Billy flipped off every last one of them.

When the boys had soon found a closet and had shut the door, Steve couldn't help but feel somewhat trapped. The closet was small, cluttered, and stank of mothballs and old perfume. He did not feel any better when he felt a pair of rough hands on his waist.

"What are you doing?"

Billy raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you don't know how this game works."

"I do. I just..."

"You just...didn't see this coming."

"No, I can't say that I did. How many times do you end up in a closet with someone who beat the shit out of you a few weeks ago?"

Billy snickered softly. It wasn't meant to be a joke. "I take it you've never been with a guy before."

Steve shook his head. "No, I haven't. Have you?"

Billy did not answer. Instead, he rummaged through his jacket and brought out a silver flask, which had an intricately detailed illustration of a sacred heart on its surface and looked to be quite old.

He took a large swig and barely flinched before handing it to Steve, who reluctantly took the flask, took one sip, and nearly choked.

“What the hell is that?” he asked once he was done coughing. “Paint-thinner?”

“It’s bourbon, princess. Swiped it from my old man.”

“How does that not sting you like a bitch? Your lip, I mean. What happened...?”

Before he can ask the question, Steve was backed into a corner and Billy’s hands were slowly creeping their way underneath his shirt like two snakes.

Jesus, he thought. His hands are so warm.

“You’ve really never been with a guy before?” Billy asked.

“Never.”

“Then I’ll try to make this good for you.”

Steve gulped. He thought for a moment that he should punch the prick in the face and run, but the way he was smiling at him rendered him perfectly still. The bastard that nearly sent him to the hospital was fucking smiling at him. *Why is he smiling at me like that?* Billy was now so close that Steve could feel the bulge in his pants against his own. *Is he hard?* He held his breath the other boy’s lips meet his own. *Is he really going to kiss me?*

He was too buzzed to care if this was a bad idea.

Billy’s lips tasted of blood and bourbon and were as warm rough as his hands. There was tooth and claw to his kiss, but also a strange tenderness to his touch. Steve wasn’t sure if it was the kiss itself or the amount of booze he’d had that caused him to do so, but he began to respond. When their lips made way for tongues, he snuck one hand into the other boy’s shirt and the other into his hair. He almost expected to feel crust or grease between the curls, but it was so soft he found himself playing with the strands just to hear the soft growling he’d get in response.

Why is he kissing me? Why am I kissing him? Why does this feel so good? Why am I so hard? The wisest man in the world could find either the best or the worst answer to all of Steve's questions and he would not give any less of a fuck.

He only stopped when he heard his pants zip open.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Steve's pants fell down to his knees with a sharp tug, followed by his boxers. He felt dangerously exposed. Before he could do anything about it, he was backed into the wall with a hot mouth on his neck and a warm hand on his cock. *Oh, God!* Steve was used to the small, soft, and slight hand of a girl's touch, but no girl had ever touched him like this. Nancy certainly never touched him like this. Billy, on the other hand, touched him with a certain expertise that couldn't have come from touching himself alone. There was something else to the way he fondled the balls, traced the length, and teased the tip.

He's done this before.

"Hargrove," he manages to gasp. "Are you...?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions, pretty boy."

With that, Billy's firm grip tightened and his steady pace quickened, almost as if out of revenge. Steve's legs were suddenly weak and he had to hold onto the other boy's jacket to keep his balance. He didn't expect to be held so tightly. When he came, all he could see was the silver pendant resting on Billy's chest.

"Jesus Christ!"

As he continued to spill into the other boy's hand, Steve expected to hear some smart-ass quip from Billy. What he got instead was one last kiss. It was strangely more chaste than before and it was not long before his boxers and jeans were back up and his spent dick was tucked back in, as though completely untouched. His legs were still weak.

“This never happened,” the younger boy growled. “If anyone asks, nothing happened. Say anything otherwise and I’ll kill you.”

Before Steve could so much as open his mouth, the door had burst open and a crowd of drunken friends, classmates, and other strangers were closing in around them. Billy was the first to rush out the door and soon disappeared into the crowd. He was nowhere to be found for the rest of the evening.

When the party was over and everyone had left, Steve returned home to an empty house. It wasn’t until he reached his bedroom that he had noticed the bruise on his neck.

What the hell happened tonight?

2. First Day of School

When the holidays were over, Chief Hopper had decided that it was best for Eleven to attend school. Steve had agreed to drive her there and, of course, her friends—Mike, Dustin, and Lucas—had tagged along. Eleven was anxious, that much he could tell. She remained perfectly silent and perfectly still, but anyone would be able to tell that she was shaking in her boots. Her friends' long list of instructions on how to survive middle school was not helping. Don't be late for class. Don't run in the hallways. Don't eat the green beans. Don't talk back to this teacher. Don't mess with that student. Don't do this. Don't do that. She was completely quiet. Steve could only smirk and shake his head.

"Don't listen to 'em, El," he said. "You'll be fine."

Once he had stopped the car, Eleven spoke for the first time in what seemed like ages. "Who is that?"

All the boys looked to where she was pointing. Steve felt a rush of butterflies in his stomach. Billy's Camaro was parked nearby with its owner strutting towards one direction and his step-sister hopping on her skateboard, rolling away to the other.

"That's Max," Dustin said with a furrowed brow. "You've met her already."

"Not her. Him."

Steve watched Billy and couldn't help but notice the cast on his left hand.

"That's her brother," he told her. "Billy."

"*Step*-brother," Mike corrected. "He's a psycho."

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. "You'll wanna stay away from him."

"He beat up Steve pretty bad after you and Hops left," Dustin explained. "But you should've seen the way Max handled him. Damn near castrated the son of a bitch, didn't she?"

Steve felt his cheeks warm and he had to bite his lip to keep from saying something stupid. Eleven, on the other hand, kept her gaze firmly on Billy. She clearly wasn't listening to any of her friends and just kept staring. Her eyes were wide and curious and sad. *Sad?* Steve was the only one to hear her whisper: "Like papa."

Steve cleared his throat. "Alright, you little shits, quit your yapping and get to class. You're gonna be late."

The boys all nodded and rushed their way out of the car. Eleven was practically glued to her seat.

"Hey," Steve said softly. "I know you're nervous. The first day of school can be pretty scary for anybody, but we've dealt with scarier things, right?"

"Right. The bad things."

"Yeah. *Really* bad things, but listen: if you ever need anything, I'm always gonna be in the other building. You can talk to me about anything you want, okay?"

She nodded, but was still stuck in her seat.

Steve smiled weakly. "You know," he said. "I went to this school too, not too long ago, and if I remember correctly, they *sometimes* serve waffles for lunch."

Eleven's eyes lit up. "Eggos?"

"Mm-hmm."

With that, the little girl was looking to her new school with a new smile on her face. She was out of the car and off with her friends like a shot.

"Good luck," he called and parked his car. Billy's car was not too far away from his.

Steve had not breathed a word of what had happened in the closet, as he was asked—*demand*ed, *more like*—though the memory was still alive

and well. Even long after he'd nursed the angry mark on his neck, the countless questions that he had of its making still rattled through his brain. Each and every one of them pointed to Billy Hargrove.

Who the hell is Billy Hargrove?

Steve thought he knew Billy. One day, he knew him as the guy that had teased him in gym class before beating the shit out of him. The next day, he knew him as the guy that had kissed him and jerked him off in a closet.

And I liked it, he kept thinking. *I fucking liked it.*

He hated to admit it, even to himself, but there was nothing about those seven minutes that he did not like. He liked the way he was held as though he was being cared for. He liked the way he was kissed with as much kindness as cruelty. He liked the way he was touched with a skill and attention to anatomy like none other. The only thing that he did not like about it was Billy himself. Steve knew well enough that he was an asshole and dreaded being anywhere near him when school started.

To his great surprise, however, Billy kept his distance. He hung around with his cronies and paid Steve very little attention. It was as if those seven minutes in the closet had never happened. Still, the "what ifs" spun around his head like a twister. *What if he's told some other asshole about what happened? What if he's told a girl about what happened? What if he's told the entire fucking school?*

Unable to concentrate, Steve excused himself from math class to use the restroom. He didn't need it, of course. He just needed to breathe. He had anticipated the lingering stench of tobacco once he opened the door, but it was the sound of metallic clicking and silent cursing that made him furrow his brow. By the half-open window, Billy Hargrove was hunched over with a cigarette in his mouth and trying to light up, but could not. The cast was failing him.

"Fuck," he muttered after each spark. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Steve sighed, reached into his pockets for his own lighter and approached the other teen.

"Here," he said and offered a light. Billy took a step back and stared with wide eyes, but soon accepted. As he took his first breath, he kept his gaze on Steve.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"You're welcome. What happened to your hand? Get into another fight or something?"

Billy took a long drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke into Steve's face. "Party got a little outa hand."

"Party?"

"New Year's Eve. Don't tell me you've forgotten about it already."

Steve's mouth went dry. He tried to remember if he had heard of a fight taking place at the party, but could recall nothing. All that he could recall was Billy disappearing after the game.

"Aww, you don't remember? I gotta say, pretty boy, I'm gutted."

Steve's face suddenly felt hot. The memory of those seven minutes seemed now more vivid than ever. He could almost feel the hot mouth and warm hand on him all over again. He mumbled under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I...I said I remember. I mean, I didn't think *you* would have, but..."

Billy burst out laughing. "Me? Forget something like *that* with a pretty boy like *you*? What do you take me for? I'm insulted."

"Oh. Well, you haven't...you know...told anyone, have you?"

Billy placed his bandaged hand on his heart. "You're killing me here, princess. Of course, I haven't."

Steve let out a heavy sigh of relief. It felt like the first breath after nearly drowning.

"So...why did you do it?" had had to ask.

"I had to do *something*."

"Not that, I mean...you know."

Billy took a long, reflective, drag from his cigarette and looked intensely at Steve. "Why'd I jerk you off, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Seemed like a good idea at the time."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"It's how the game is played."

Steve huffed and turned on his heel. *Asshole*.

"Aww, c'mon! Don't be like that."

"Why not? It was just a game, right? If that's all it was, fine. Forget it. See ya 'round, Hargrove."

Steve turned to walk away, but before he could reach the door he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, spinning him around until his back hit the wall. Billy's lips crashed into his like a bullet. His mouth tasted of dried blood, cheap tobacco, and stolen bourbon. Steve nearly choked on the taste of him, but responded.

"It wasn't *just* a game," Billy whispered against his lips. "Not to me."

"What was it, then?"

"Ask me again in a couple of hours."

"A couple of hours?"

Billy nodded. "In a couple of hours, you're gonna meet me in the parking lot, we're gonna drive off to somewhere more...private, let's say, and then we're *really* gonna play."

Steve felt his cock begin to stir. "You're kidding me."

"I'm really not, pretty boy." As if to prove it, Billy pressed against Steve, grinding against him just to make him shudder. "You really wanna know if it was just a game? You're gonna meet me in that parking lot at noon, sharp."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we'll call this whole thing off and it'll be like nothing ever happened."

"I have a test this afternoon."

"Do you wanna take a test that you can easily take next week or do you wanna get off with me? It's your choice, Harrington."

Steve opened his mouth to give his answer, but jumped when he heard the door open and two other boys enter the bathroom. Billy was on the other end of the room within the blink of an eye, returning to his cigarette as if he wasn't just grinding against the other boy. Steve was the only one to notice how hard he was, but said nothing of it and left.

The rest of the morning was slow. Each second, minute, and hour passed by like an age. Steve was losing count of how many times he'd checked his watch. His heart was racing and his mind stirring. Finally, when the clock struck noon, the devil on his shoulder was begging him to step foot on that parking lot while the angel on his other shoulder was nagging him about that test.

Fuck the test, he thought. *Fuck it*.

Billy was resting against the side of the Camaro. *Like a goddamn pinup*, Steve thought.

"You made it," he said, licking his lips.

"Yeah, I did. What happens now?"

Billy opened the door and winked. "Hop in."

Steve did as he was told. Billy did not hesitate to start up. He didn't

even bother to buckle up and was already driving so fast, he may well have been running from the law.

“Hargove! Slow down, will yo—oh!”

Billy wasn't listening. He was too busy with one hand on the wheel and the other on the other boy's crotch. Steve was beginning to stiffen. His cock was getting harder and harder with each stroke to the point where he was so close to tearing his jeans off of his legs. Soon, he was bucking into Billy's hand.

Before long, they were in the middle of nowhere. There were no cars, no houses, no people surrounding them. Just trees. Within seconds of parking, Billy was all over Steve. His kiss was vicious and hungry, like an animal.

“Get in the back seat,” he demanded. Steve scrambled from his seat and dove into the back. Billy all but pounced on him.

Steve was crushed under Billy's weight. He could barely breathe and could only gasp for air when he felt a stiff cock against his thigh. Billy was kissing him hard and grinding against him like a dog in heat and his hands were everywhere. *God, his hands feel amazing!* Steve's own hands were shaking, not knowing where to go first. Billy's hair? Billy's waist? Billy's ass? He began to experiment, paying close attention to the reactions he got when he raked his fingers through the dark blond curls, or circled his thumbs around the hard nipples, or grabbed the firm cheeks of his ass. The latter pulled a guttural groan from Billy's mouth and caused his hips to buck. *So he likes that*, Steve thought with a smile that he couldn't suppress and squeezed again for another moan. *Okay. What if I went a little further?*

“Easy there, princess,” Billy growled before Steve's hands were in his pants.

“What? You don't like that?”

“No, I love it, but if you keep that up we might be stepping into some dangerous territory.”

Steve furrowed his brow. *What the hell does that mean?*

“Don’t worry,” he continued, as he nibbled his way down Steve’s neck. “You’re not ready for that yet, but I can do something else for you.”

“You...?”

“Ssh, it’s okay. You’ll like it, pretty boy, I promise.”

He was making his way down, kiss after kiss. Soon, Steve was sitting back up and Billy’s head was in his lap.

Oh!

As Billy’s lips teased Steve’s cock through his jeans, which were now so tight he feared they would cut off his circulation, his hands held onto the hips to keep them from bucking before they made their way in. Steve’s jeans and boxers were pulled down to his ankles and Billy teased him even further with a long lick along the length from the base to the tip. Already, he could feel the pre-come leaking.

“Jesus, Hargrove!”

“You like that?”

“I really do. God, don’t stop!”

Billy looked up at him with a wicked smile on his face and continued to tease the tip with his tongue. Steve was beginning to regret every time he had mentally cursed that tongue. It felt too good on him to curse and he could only imagine what else it could do. No sooner had the thought entered his mind than Billy took all of Steve into his mouth.

“Oh, *fuck!*”

It was nothing like any blowjob he’d ever been given before. Though he was never one to turn down a warm mouth—*What sane man would do a thing like that?*—he was so used to a soft pair of lips wrapped around the head of his cock, a gentle tongue teasing his frenulum, and a hot mouth inexpertly taking his length as deep as it could without choking. Billy did all of that and more. He took all of Steve: the tip, the length, the balls.

Where did he learn all of this?

“Billy...wha-? Fuck, I’m gonna come!”

Billy stopped sucking. Before Steve could protest, he felt a firm grip milking his dick and came with a guttural cry. The young punk’s touch became strangely soft on his twitching body. *Even with the cast, his hands feel amazing!* For a moment, Steve felt like he was floating and it was only until his feet were on the ground that he realized that Billy was still hard. He hadn’t gotten off.

“Let me.”

Billy looked up with wide eyes. Steve had just gathered enough strength in his now limp legs to crawl over the other boy and bring him onto his back. He started by cupping and palming at the hard dick through tight jeans just to see Billy’s eyes roll into the back of his head, choking out his pleasure. He then moved onto the open shirt and found a nipple. *Girls like that*, he thought. *Would a guy? Only one way to find out.* Steve took Billy’s nipple into his mouth and continued palming his dick. The choking sounds were now suppressed cries. *So he does like it.* Steve continued until Billy was begging.

“Please,” he panted. “I want it.”

That was all it took. Steve struggled to open Billy’s jeans, only to have them soon opened for him. *Of course, he goes commando.* Billy’s cock sprung free without any restraint. Steve took the length into his mouth and gagged.

“Easy,” Billy chuckled. “Not so fast, pretty boy, d’you wanna choke on that thing? Take it slowly, one inch at a time. Yeah, like that. Watch the teeth. Good. Use your tongue. Jesus! Hands too. Oh, fuck yeah!”

Steve did everything that Billy told him to do and more. He never thought he would want to make the prick feel good, but he liked the way he raked his fingers through his hair and repeated his name like it was a mantra. He still gagged every now and then and struggled to take the length into his mouth. He found himself even drooling on it,

much to his embarrassment, but was surprised to find that Billy didn't seem to mind. He seemed to like it, in fact.

"You look good like that, Harrington. Fuck, you might wanna back off."

"Back off?"

Billy's fingers tightened on Steve's scalp, pulling him closer by the hair. Steve groaned. He never thought he'd like having his hair pulled. Any other moan was drowned out by Billy's harsh kiss. His mouth still tasted vaguely of blood and bourbon.

"I'm close," he growled. "You're not ready to taste me yet, princess."

Yet.

Steve said nothing of it. Instead, he took the hard nipple back into his mouth and kept his hand wrapped firmly around the length. He found it no different to touching himself. As he kept stroking, his eyes were focused on the pendant resting on Billy's chest. He recognized it from before, but only took notice of it in the party. It was a figure of the Virgin Mary.

Billy came, practically roaring, within seconds and twitching against Steve.

The teenaged boys fell side-by-side, exposed and panting. Only then did it occur to Steve what he and Billy looked like. He was half-naked and covered in his own semen and in the backseat of his enemy's car with said enemy at his side, also half-naked and covered in his own semen. If someone had told him three months ago that he'd be in this position, he would have scoffed.

Then again, he reminded himself. If someone had told me three years ago that I'd be fighting off an army of monsters from another dimension, I'd probably scoff then too.

3. Happy Valentine's Day

Billy drove Steve back to school later that day. The ride back was quick and quiet. *Awkward*. Neither of them spoke until the car was parked.

Steve cleared his throat. "So...now what?"

"Now, you get your ass back in class, you tell nobody—and I mean *nobody*—about what happened, and you meet me here again tomorrow. Same time, same place."

Eyes wide and chest pounding, Steve could only stare at Billy, who did not take one look back. "You want to do this *again*?"

"Got a problem with that?"

Steve thought for a moment and found that he didn't. They had agreed to meet again, and again, and again.

On Monday, Steve met Billy in the boys' room, where they jerked each other off in a bathroom stall. On Tuesday, Billy grabbed Steve by the shirt and dragged him into his car, where they dry-humped until they were both bursting. On Wednesday, Steve found Billy in the janitor's closet, where he was soon pressed against the wall with a hot mouth wrapped tightly around his dick. On Thursday, Billy found Steve in an empty classroom, where he fucked his mouth into oblivion. On Friday, Steve drove Billy into the middle of the woods, where he took both their cocks into his hand and stroked until they were both a mess of sweat and sex.

This went on for quite some time and wasn't likely to stop anytime soon, but after a month, they became more experimental.

When Billy's left hand was fully healed, he was more than willing to take advantage of it. He had driven Steve to what soon became "their place" in the middle of the woods on the edge of town and kissed him so deeply that it made his cock stir and his stomach flutter. Before long, they were both half naked and jerking each other off like their

lives depended on it. Billy reached one hand behind Steve, who made a noise that could have been heard from miles away when he felt the first fingertip teasing his ass. Smiling wickedly, Billy continued stroking Steve with one hand and penetrating him with the other. It took only moments to find just the right spot that made him see stars.

Not too long afterwards, after basketball practise, they had taken over empty showers when the rest of their team had left. When Billy grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him in for a deep kiss, Steve was expecting the usual hand job or blow job, but gasped when he was turned around and bent over. He thought briefly that he should have been afraid of whatever it was that the other boy was about to do to him and his body tensed when he felt his cheeks spread. *But, fuck, those hands!* Steve had expected Billy to fuck him right then and there, but instead of his cock, he felt his tongue. He wondered for a moment if he should have been disgusted at what the hell Billy was doing, but when Steve felt the tip of the tongue teasing his entrance, disgust was the last thing on his mind. Once again, he found himself regretting every time he had ever cursed that blessed tongue.

Steve never thought he'd like having his ass played with, but Billy worked his way around it like a pro. They hadn't fucked *just* yet—"You're not ready for that yet, princess," Billy kept saying—though they had teased the idea. Steve thought he should have been nervous about the idea of being fucked in the ass, but he was growing more and more eager. When he masturbated at night, he would often try to finger himself the way Billy did and had to bite his lip to keep from screaming when he came.

Even when they weren't fooling around, Billy found a way to drive Steve crazy: the innuendos in basketball practice and the cheeky glances in the classes that he'd actually bothered to attend. As long as he was discreet about it—or, at least as discreet as someone like him *could* be—Billy would always find a way to get under Steve's skin.

That was their rule. Be discreet. No dates or romantic gestures. Don't kiss or hold hands in public. Above all things, don't tell anyone. No hints, no vague mentions, no telling anyone. Ever. Steve was fine with this. God only knew what his friends would say about it, but why Billy was so adamant about it was beyond him, as he had started the damn thing in the first place and preened like a fucking peacock

whenever he had the chance.

But it works.

Steve wasn't gay—at least, *I don't think I am*—just curious.

For the first time in his life, Steve hated Valentine's Day. As a kid, it usually meant a lot of cards and a lot of chocolates, which he liked. As a teenager, it usually meant all that plus the promise of sex with a new girlfriend, which he also liked. February 14th, 1985, meant neither of those things. There were no cards or chocolates left in his locker and his chances of getting into the pants of a pretty girl were low.

A pretty guy, on the other hand...

Steve shook his head of the thought and rummaged through his locker, which he had half-expected to see flooded with cards, but there were none. At the corner of his eye, he could see Nancy and Jonathan at the other end of the hallway. She was at her locker and smiled at the card that was left for her, while he snuck up from behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her cheek. Steve tried to ignore them and searched through his shelf for his notebook and pencil case.

"Aww," Tommy Hill chimed past him. "Poor Stevie. Must suck to know that a freak has better game than you."

Steve chose to ignore his old friend, but felt someone lean against the locker next to his.

"Fucking prick," he heard Billy mutter.

"He's not that bad."

"A herpes sore ain't that bad either; still a pain in the ass."

Steve suppressed a smirk and pretended to ignore Billy. Truth be told, he had to agree: Tommy *was* a pain in the ass, but he would never say it out loud.

“Didn’t you used to be friends with that guy?” Billy asked.

“Used to. Anyway, I thought *you* were friends with him now.”

“Semantics. I just wanna know what his weak spot is.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Jesus, you’re such an asshole.”

“Well, you are what you eat.”

Steve furrowed his brow and looked to the other boy, who began to overtly lick his lips with a suggestive wink. He held his breath for a moment, but soon burst out laughing. Billy smiled, but only for a moment. He slammed Steve’s locker door shut and took a firm step before him. There was a mere inch between them.

“I’m gonna fuck you tonight.”

By the growl in his voice and the predatory nature of his stance, anyone else would have taken Billy’s statement as a threat. Steve knew better.

“Is that so?” he asked, trying desperately to hide the arousal rushing through his body.

Billy nodded. “A little birdie told me that you got some nice house that’s always free.”

“Well, not tonight. My folks are actually home, for once.”

“Mine, then. My old man’s taking Susan out to dinner for Valentine’s Day and Max has a date with one of your little brats, so it’ll just be you and me. Just don’t expect to stay the night and cuddle. I’m not making you breakfast or some shit like that.”

Steve nodded, though he felt like he should have been just a little bit disappointed.

“Meet me in the parking lot at six o’clock and don’t make me wait.”

Billy said nothing else of the matter and shoved the older teen out of his way. Steve knew that he was still playing the part of the bully and

he was more than willing to play along, but he had to fight back his growing smile and twitching cock. He managed to hide his semi behind his books on his way to class.

An evening alone getting fucked by my worst enemy. Happy Valentine's Day to me!

"Home sweet home," Billy said when he opened the door. His place was small, filthy, and stank of piled up beer cans and cigarette butts. All Steve could smell was Billy: the old leather jacket on his back, the stolen liquor and tobacco on his breath, the cologne mingling with the sweat on his skin. All flesh and blood, all bourbon and cigarettes, all metal and mayhem, all Billy Hargrove.

Billy dragged Steve throughout the house and to his bedroom. Once the door crashed shut behind them, they stumbled inside. Steve nearly lost his balance until he was backed into the wall with Billy's hands and mouth all over him.

Until he stopped.

"I'll be right back," Billy said softly and left.

Steve was all alone in his worst enemy's bedroom. *Nothing unusual about that*, he thought. The room wasn't especially tidy, as he had expected. On the walls were pictures of rock stars and porn stars, also as expected. What Steve never would have expected to see in his life, however, were so many books.

There were shelves of books, stacks of books, and piles of books. Old books, new books, books he'd heard about, books he hadn't heard about, and some books that looked as if they'd been read several times to the point of falling apart. *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *1984* by George Orwell, *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, and the list went on and on and on. It was the book on the bedside table that caught Steve's eye the most: *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. *The kids love that book*, he remembered and picked it up to open the cover.

July 30th, 1977, it read in a delicate hand. Dear Billy. Now that you're ten, here is a book for older children that I know you'll love. Hopefully, it will stir your imagination the way it did mine. Happy Birthday! Love, mom.

Steve felt a smile teasing the corner of his lips when tried to picture a ten-year-old Billy. Before he could, the door was open. Billy was strutting towards him with something hidden behind his back.

"Hey," Steve said. "I didn't know you were such a bookworm."

"Well, there's a lot you don't know about me."

Clearly, he wanted to say, but was stopped with a kiss before he could open his mouth. Billy took the book from Steve's hand and pushed him to the bed. Billy placed a bottle of lube that was hidden behind his back on the bedside table and all but tore his clothes from his back. All but the pendant hanging from his neck.

"Well," he urged. "Don't just sit there drooling, pretty boy. Strip."

Steve was more than happy to obey. Once they were both naked, he had to grab the other boy by the scruff of his neck and drag him down to the bed next to him. Both hard and hungry, they dropped to the bed, limbs entwined, and kissing like the horny teenagers they were.

What the fuck am I doing?

Billy's hands were everywhere and his erection was just rubbing against Steve's. It was enough to make his head spin. Now and then, his hips would involuntarily jerk against the other boy's and became more eager when he felt the first finger teasing his hole. Billy's finger circled around the rim, pulling sweet sighs from the back of Steve's throat. Before he could beg for more, he felt himself being flipped onto his stomach and forced onto his hands and knees. He had never felt so vulnerable in his life. His body grew tense when he felt a hard cock teasing his ass. Billy climbed over him and his breath was warm on Steve's neck

"Don't worry," he whispered. "I've got you, princess."

He almost sounded affectionate in his reassurance. Almost. Steve shuddered when he felt the first kiss behind his ear, then the second on his neck, the third between his shoulders, and then all others trailing behind his back until they reached his crack.

“Oh, God!”

Billy’s tongue was warm against Steve. He circled the rim with tentative care before teasing the hole with the tip of his tongue. Anything that he knew would make the other boy moan. Long since squeamish about this act, Steve was soon reaching behind him to grab Billy by the hair to pull him closer, begging for more. Billy could only moan in response and dig his fingers into Steve’s skin. The vibration against his entrance and the firm hands on his cheeks were almost too much. It took all of Steve’s strength to keep from screaming at the top of his lungs.

And then he felt nothing.

Steve turned to find Billy sitting up. “Don’t stop!”

Billy chuckled softly, reached for the bottle of lube, and poured a generous dollop onto his fingers before hovering over Steve. “Easy, princess. I’m not gonna stop.”

With that, Steve felt the first finger inside him. Billy was whispering the filthiest things into his ear, as he worked his way to stretch the hole. Steve already knew how good Billy’s hands felt, but when they were inside him they felt fucking amazing.

“You like that?”

“Yes!”

“Does that feel good?”

“Yes!”

“Yeah? Feel good when I do *this*?”

“Oh, *fuck* yes!”

Billy had inserted a second finger and was quick to find *that* spot. Steve's head was spinning and he could feel the pre-come leaking from his cock. He was fighting the urge to touch himself, like he had whenever Billy touched him like this before, but he resisted. He refused to spill himself too soon like a pathetic virgin.

Well, I am technically a virgin. I've never had a guy in me.

After a third finger made its way in, Billy reached into his bedside table drawer, and pulled out a condom. Steve furrowed his brow. In his experience, those were used to prevent pregnancy.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"You don't know where I've been, Harrington."

Before Steve could ask what the hell he was talking about, Billy continued to stretch him even further before abandoning the stretched hole to roll the condom onto his cock and coating it with lube. He entered slowly and gently, but his sweet words were hissed with all the tenderness of a viper. When he was fully lodged inside, their cries could be heard from the streets.

"Fuck," Billy groaned. "You're so tight, pretty boy. So warm."

Steve couldn't say a word. He'd never felt so full in his life. It hurt—*God, it hurts*—and was likely to for days. He half expected Billy to lose control and start fucking him raw, but he was perfectly still. By the grunts and groans coming from the back of his throat, Steve could tell he was trying—*fuck, he is trying*—not to move.

"Move," Steve whined. "Please."

"Think you can take it?"

"I want it."

Billy moved slowly, at first, but picked up his pace with each thrust. The pain soon faded and with every nudge at *that* spot, it became something else. Steve could only describe it as pleasure, but it was a different kind to getting his cock sucked or his ass licked. He wondered briefly if this was what girls felt when they were getting

fucked. Whatever it was, it was bringing him closer and closer to the edge.

He had to touch himself.

Once he did, he felt Billy's fingers raking through his hair and pulling it hard. Soon, Steve was sitting up in Billy's lap. The young punk was now thrusting even deeper into him and slapping his hand away, grabbing the length and stroking it himself.

"You like that, princess? Does it feel good having my dick in your ass?"

Steve could only respond with hushed cries, which were met with a harsh kiss.

"I wanna watch you come. Come for me!"

And that did it for Steve. One bite on his shoulder and he was coming harder than he ever had in his life and spilling thick strings of cum all over himself. Billy made a sound in his ear that stood somewhere in between a chuckle and a groan, as he picked up the pace and came roaring.

When it was over, Billy stayed inside Steve for some time and held him. Even as they fell panting and exhausted, Billy would hold Steve so close, as if he never wanted to let go. Steve almost didn't want him to. Every now and then, he would run his warm hands over the older boy's body—his arms, his chest, his stomach, his thighs—almost in a similar way that one would stroke a cat. Like a cat, Steve drank in every last touch and purred in response.

God, I love those hands!

Soon, Billy softened and slipped out of Steve. After throwing the full condom in the trash, he took a cigarette from his bedside table and lit up. He passed it to Steve after his first drag. The boys lay side-by-side for what seemed like hours, simply passing the cigarette back and forth.

Steve was the first to break the silence between them. "You've done that before."

Billy grinned through a puff of smoke. "You sound surprised by that."

"Well, you have, haven't you?"

"I'm from Cali, pretty boy. What do you think?"

Steve had no idea what to think. He had never been to California. All he knew about it was that it was always sunny and surrounded by palm trees.

"What was it like?" he had to ask.

Billy took a long drag of his cigarette and passed it to Steve. There was a smile playing at the corner of his lips. Not the wicked smile that Steve was used to seeing on him, but a softer and almost dreamy smile.

"Warm," he said softly. "Sometimes the air was so hot you could almost taste it, but then the sea mist in the wind would always cool you down. The nights were my favourite. All those bright lights in the dark and concerts by the boardwalk. Some old friends and I used to spend all night just goofing off in the fairground, even after closing hours. It was kind of our hangout. We'd sneak in, drink a lot, get high, fool around, and someone would always bring Chinese. Sometimes, when one of us got a little *too* high, David would play this joke on them to make them think that the rice was actually maggots or something like that. It worked every time!"

The boys laughed until they were out of breath and left in silence once again.

"Who's David?" Steve asked.

Billy's smile fell flat. His hand appeared weak and he couldn't bring the cigarette to his lips. Before he could open his mouth to answer, he jumped.

"Shit!"

Billy scrambled to his feet and snuffed out the cigarette, clumsily rushing through the pile of clothes. Steve looked to the other boy, then to the window, and then throughout the room.

“What is it?”

“My folks,” Billy hissed. “They’re home already. You have to go.”

Steve’s clothes flew in his face before he could say another word. As he struggled to get his pants back on, he too could hear the car parking nearby. He wanted to think that it was some neighbour’s car, but couldn’t speak. Billy wouldn’t let him.

“Hurry up!” he urged, but his eyes grew wild when they heard the front door open. “Fuck! You have to get out of here.”

“How?”

“Get out the window.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m dead serious. Get out!”

Steve, still half-naked, struggled to worm his way out the window and fell to the ground. Billy slammed the window shut and gestured him to run before closing the curtains.

Steve was left out in the cold.

4. After the Honeymoon

Steve overslept the next morning. He nearly flew out of his bed when he saw the clock strike nine and struggled to get dressed, not caring that his clothes were still dirty or that his ass still hurt like hell. Once he was somewhat decent, he rushed downstairs and grabbed his bags. He didn't make it to the front door.

"Hold it right there," boomed a stern voice. Steve froze in his tracks and turned around.

His father, Fred, a stout man of nearly fifty with no hair apart from his thistledown beard, was standing firmly before him with his arms crossed. His mother, Maria, a dark-haired woman of forty who was once beautiful, slouched in her seat at the kitchen table and watched with a cup of coffee in both hands.

"Where were you last night?" Fred asked.

"I was at a friend's place," Steve answered and it wasn't technically a lie. "We were studying for a test."

"Like the history test you missed three days ago? Or the math class you missed last week? Or the science test you missed the week before that?"

All those times he'd spent with Billy Hargrove. *Shit*. "I just..."

"You just thought you could do your own thing, right? You thought you could skip that many classes and get away with it or stay out at night until three in the morning without so much as a phone call?"

Well, I wouldn't have missed any of those classes or been out so late if I hadn't been spending so much time with my worst enemy. Why do I spend so much time with my worst enemy, you ask? Well, we're fucking. Can I pick up the kids and go to school now? "I'm sorry, dad."

"You're 'sorry?' Do you think 'sorry' is going to help you get into Harvard?"

I don't want to go to Harvard. "No."

“Do you think ‘sorry’ is going to make a lawyer out of you?”

I don't want to be a fucking lawyer. “No.”

“‘Sorry’ isn’t going to get you anywhere, Steve. Sort yourself out!”

You could do with some sorting yourself, Fred. “I will.”

Fred sighed and shook his head. Maria only watched with a dark glare, which had never failed to frighten Steve. *If she starts ranting in Italian, I'm a dead man.*

“Get to school,” Fred grunted, waving his hand at his son as though he were nothing and turning him away. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Steve gathered his things with shaking hands. He could still fear his father seeing even from another room and he in the corner of his eye he could still see his mother’s sinister stare. Even as she casually took a sip of her coffee, it was weighing down on him like stones in his pockets. Once his still trembling hands had his textbooks, notebooks, pens, and pencils packed in his bag, he turned to his mother.

“Listen to your father, Stefano,” she said. *The full name card. Fuck!* “You’re going to be late.”

Eleven was waiting at the door of the cabin with her arms crossed. Steve’s first instinct was to be afraid, as he knew how dangerous she could be when she had *that* look in her eyes. It was a similar dark glare to his mother’s. He shuddered and shook his head. There was no time to be afraid.

“El,” he called. “Get in the car.”

Eleven was hesitant, but marched into the car and kept her arms crossed when she was strapped to the passenger seat. Steve began to drive.

“You’re late,” she said. “He’s mad at you.”

Hops, he reminded himself. *He's not the only one.* “Yeah, I kinda had a feeling about that.”

“He said: ‘If he’s late again, you’re allowed to crush his brains.’”

Steve, not as shocked as he probably should have been, shrugged and nodded. *I probably deserve that.*

Dustin, Mike, and Lucas all had the same reactions. Steve kept his eye on the road, as each rant and every curse went in one ear and out the other. He was half tempted to turn around and let the kids walk to school and go home so he could fall back into bed, he was so tired. The lingering cold in his body and pain in his backside was no help.

The school grounds were empty, save for the few students skipping class. Billy Hargrove, of course, was among them. He was alone and sitting casually on the hood of his Camaro, smoking a cigarette and staring into space, as if nothing had happened the previous night. Steve swallowed back any crude insult that he could think to call the bastard.

He did not see Eleven watching him.

Steve stopped the car in front of the middle school building. “Everyone out, now. You’re already late.”

“So are you,” Dustin shot.

“Out!”

The boys scrambled out of the car and ran clumsily to the door. Eleven, on the other hand, seemed to be staring into space.

“You too, El, out. Get to class.”

Eleven looked at the older boy as if she could see through him, but made her way out of the car and to the door without argument. When Steve drove away, he did not see her walking towards Billy.

Steve was late. An hour and a half late, in fact. Late to wake up, late pick up the kids, late to drop them off, and late to his first–no–second class. Of course, his English teacher had every right to scold him, but it was his thoughts that made his teeth grind. He tried–God, he tried–to pay attention to whatever it was that Shakespeare said about the

“Fair Youth,” but no matter how many times he tried to shake his head and concentrate, his thoughts would always turn to Billy fucking Hargrove.

I'm in deep shit because of that prick and I still fantasize about him. What is wrong with me?

Steve dreaded the rest of his day.

At lunch, Steve felt his stomach tighten when he found himself gathering food next to Tommy Hill, of all people. He tried to ignore the prick, but couldn't ignore the shiner on his right eye.

“Jesus!” he said. “Hill, what happened to you?”

“Ask your boyfriend.”

Tommy kept his head hung, but had no way of hiding the angry bruise. It haunted Steve. Even as he walked away with his tray of food, his stomach was still tight from his old friend's response. *Ask your boyfriend. Ask your boyfriend. Ask your boyfriend.* Did he know? How did he find out? Were people talking?

When he sat down, he could barely eat. People were staring at him. He didn't have to look around to tell that they were. He knew it. He just knew it. He could feel the weight of each gawk and every sneer the way he felt the weight of his mother's. Everywhere he turned, someone was looking his way, either giggling or looking him up and down. He was used to this, of course, though it had never felt more unsettling.

“Hi, Steve!”

Steve nearly jumped from his seat, staring at the smiling girl who took a seat before him and began to eat without another word. “Um...hi, Nancy.”

“How've you been?” she asked. “I haven't seen you in a while.”

Probably because we haven't been together for a while. “Busy.”

“Yeah, me too. The year's been pretty rough, so far, right? I think I'll

pass out from studying so much before we're even close to finals."

Don't remind me. "Finals?"

"The final exams..." Nancy babbled on what seemed like a lecture about the exams at the end of term, which eventually lead to another lecture about the importance of studying, which lead to two or three other lectures, which lead to several other things that Steve didn't give a damn about.

"Nancy," he had to interrupt. "Why are you here?"

Nancy's smile began to fade. "I wanted to talk to you, I guess."

"About?"

"Well, nothing. I just...miss you."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "You miss me?"

"Yeah. I mean, I know we broke up, but I still care about you."

That's rich, Steve wanted to say, but instead turned to playing with his food.

"I saw you talking to Billy Hargrove yesterday."

Steve froze in his seat. Did she know? Did everyone know? "Yeah. So?"

"What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "He was just being an asshole, as usual."

"It didn't look like it. I saw you laughing at something he said. It looked like you were kind of...getting along. Are you two, like, friends now? Even after...?"

Even after he beat the shit out of me. I know. Steve rolled his eyes. "Screw you."

Nancy nearly dropped her fork, eyes wide and mouth agape. "What?"

"I said: 'screw you.'"

"Steve, I was just..."

"Concerned? Sure you were."

"I was! I was just worried that..."

"You know what, Nancy? You're the one who pretended to love me for a year and then said our relationship was 'bullshit' right to my face. Do you seriously think you can break my heart and then have the right to say who I can and can't talk to?"

"Steve, he almost killed you!"

"But he didn't!"

Nancy sat frozen with her mouth agape. "Steve?"

"Leave me alone." Steve marched away from the table and threw his lunch in the trash, ignoring any passing stare.

Steve was staring at the large red C at the top of his test throughout his entire history class. Three weeks studying the second world war until his head exploded on a battleground of scribbled notes and history books and all he got was a C. *Fuck*. The class seemed to pass by in a flash and by the time it was over, he did not remember a word his teacher had said.

He kicked his locker and didn't care who was unsettled or alarmed. *Fuck yesterday, fuck today, fuck tomorrow, and fuck Billy Hargrove. Fuck!*

He was leaning his head against his locker when he heard several little feet running towards him. The boys were breathless and exhausted as if they'd been running a marathon.

"Jesus!" he said. "Guys, what are you doing here?"

Dustin panted. "We. Can't. Find. Eleven."

“What?”

“She was. Supposed. To be. In school. Oh, cramp!”

“We’ve looked everywhere,” Mike said too fast and too loud. “She could be lost and scared and...”

“Easy, easy. She’s probably just in the lady’s room or something.”

“For the whole day?” Lucas shot.

Steve stiffened. He looked to the emptying hallway and then back to the younger boys. *I’m going to take my precious time out of my shitty day to miss another class because of someone else that I barely know. Great.*

“You guys stay here and catch your breath. I’m going to try and look for her and if I’m not back in an hour, call a teacher. Okay?”

“Okay,” the boys all said (or panted) in unison. Steve marched away.

He must have looked through every hallway and lost count of the times he’d called out her name. Eventually, the last place he looked was in the parking lot. He sighed in relief when he saw her but also squinted at who she was talking to. *Billy?* They were sitting side-by-side on the hood of the Camaro and they were talking. Billy must have said something funny because Eleven was smiling. Steve never thought he’d see her smiling like that. Least of all, he never thought he’d see someone like *him* smiling at someone like *her*.

“Hey,” he called.

They both looked up and stopped talking. Their smiles were already fading.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Talking to Billy.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Why aren’t you in class?”

“Relax, Harrington,” Billy chimed in. “The little lady just wanted a

friend to talk to.”

“Is that so? Well, your *other* friends have been worried sick about you. Get off the car.”

Eleven sat perfectly still.

“Get. Off. The. Car.”

She looked up to Billy, who simply shrugged. “Go on, kid.”

Eleven smiled weakly, nodded, and hopped off the car. Steve stopped her before she could make her way back to class. “I don’t wanna see you skipping class anymore, okay?”

She frowned and pushed her way past him. On her way back to the building, she waved goodbye to Billy, who smiled and waved back. Steve, however, could only stare at him with his hands on his hips.

“I don’t know what you’re so happy about,” he said. “You’ve already gotten *me* into deep shit and you could have done the same to her.”

“I didn’t know she was one of yours, okay?”

“That’s not the point. She was *supposed* to be in class and while we’re on that, I’ve lost count of how many I’ve missed because of you. I managed to make it home last night, by the way. Thanks for the ride you didn’t pitch me.”

“Well, what was I supposed to do? Let my old man catch you with your pants down? Anyway, lots o’ kids skip class.”

“That’s not something you should encourage, least of all with her. It’s important that she stays in school, alright? You don’t know where she comes from.”

“She dropped a couple of hints. ‘Bad place,’ she said.”

Steve’s eyes widened. *What else did she tell him?* He shook his head of the thought and took a step closer, pointing a finger at the punk’s half-exposed chest. “Don’t do it again.”

Billy did not take a step back. The bastard didn't even flinch. He simply bit his lip and looked Steve up and down. "You're pretty hot when you get bossy, you know that? This protective side of you is kinda turning me on."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Christ, do you *ever* take anything seriously?"

"Hey, just trying to lighten up the mood," Billy rummaged through his jacket, pulled out his flask and took a swig before offering it to Steve. "Drink?"

"I really hope you didn't give her any of that. Should you even be drinking this early in the day?"

"Fuck's sake, princess, maybe you oughta relax. I didn't know you cared so much about the little shit, anyway."

"Well, I *do* care. I don't expect you to understand what that feels like."

Billy's wicked smile had faded into nothing, but his eyes were burning. The last time Steve had seen that look on his face, he was nearly killed. Before he could so much as take one step back, he felt a hard shove on his chest and his back had hit the ground. For a brief moment, he couldn't breathe, but Billy was towering over him. He did not offer his hand.

"You don't know me," he snarled. "Don't think I don't know what it is to care about someone just because I don't have anyone left to care about."

Steve looked up and only met Billy's eye for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak, but Billy marched back into his car before he could so much as find the words.

"I told you to plant your feet," Billy said before slamming the door shut and driving off. Steve shuffled back onto his feet to avoid being hit, nearly losing his balance. The Camaro sped in zig-zags out of the parking lot and was out of sight within seconds.

As he managed to regain his balance and tend to the sudden bruising in his shoulder, Billy's words echoed in Steve's brain. The growl in

his voice sounded somewhat similar to a wolf attacking anyone who dared threaten his pack. It was the look in his eyes that haunted Steve the most. Even as with every push and punch that he had endured, he had never seen those eyes look like that. They were bright, and blue, and burning.

You don't know me, he heard his voice growling. *Don't think I don't know what it is to care about someone just because I don't have anyone left to care about.*

Who *did* Billy care about, then?

Steve barely slept that night. He had a dream that he had been running through the woods, chased by a pack of shadows in the shapes of demo dogs, some with their teeth bared and others that seemed to scream his name. It was the ugliest sound he'd ever heard. He did not know where he was running, but with every step he took he felt as if he were moving through water and his feet were slowly sinking into the ground. Before he could be swallowed up whole, all he saw was Billy Hargrove leaning against his Camaro.

"You don't know me," he said. "I told you to plant your feet."

In the blink of an eye, Billy was in the car and someone else was with him. Steve couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. All he could see was Billy kissing them and stripping them naked. Even as the stranger was bare and bouncing on his cock, Billy kept his eye on Steve, laughing as the ground swallowed him whole.

Steve woke with a start. He was shaking like a leaf, slick with cold sweat, and his pajama bottoms appeared to have shrunk. Once his pulse had slowed and his breath had caught up with him, he lay down and wasn't sure who to curse for the fact that he was still hard: himself or Billy Hargrove.

Closing his eyes, he took three deep breaths to clear his mind. When they were open again, he reached for the magazine under his pillowcase; one every teenaged boy has. He flipped through pages and pages of buxom blondes—*Billy's blonde*. *Dammit!*—touching either themselves or other beauties, some men, some women, until he

landed on one page that suited him. A blonde woman was bent over, her blue eyes rolling into the back of her head and her full, red lips parted in ecstasy, as a large, hairy man pounded his cock into her ass.

Steve kept his eye on the woman, as he reached between his legs and began to stroke. Every now and then, his eye would slip onto the hard cock in the woman's ass, but the harder he tried the more difficult it became to avoid staring at the man in the picture.

Throwing the magazine to the ground, he closed his eyes and began to drift into his own fantasy. He imagined fucking a pretty blonde in the ass like the man in the picture was. He imagined moving into her while digging his fingers into her skin. He imagined her moaning his name with every thrust he took. He imagined her voice getting deeper and deeper as she inched closer and closer to climax. Soon, the round, supple breasts above a slender waist became strong, sturdy pecs between broad shoulders. The lithe legs became thick thighs wrapped around him. The soft kisses became rough with stubble. The golden mane of curls began to take the shape of a mullet.

He was getting close and he didn't care what brought him closer.

He thought of Billy Hargrove. Billy Hargrove kissing him the way he did. Billy Hargrove stroking him like he did in the closet. Billy Hargrove sucking him off in the car. Billy Hargrove eating his ass in the gym showers. Billy Hargrove fucking him raw until they were both screaming. He thought of fucking Billy Hargrove.

Steve reached for a nearby sock on the floor and stroked himself into it until he came with a grunt.

When he came down from his climax, he wasn't as disgusted with himself as he thought he should have been. Instead, he felt somewhat relieved. In spite of all the thoughts that had been rushing through his head all day long, it was a comfort to know that he was clear on one thing: Steve still wanted Billy.

I am so fucked.

5. Spring Break

Billy hadn't spoken to Steve since that day. Save for the occasional taunt during basketball practice, he kept his distance. He did not make innuendos, he did not preen, and he did not shoot a seductive glance across the room. Not even a saucy wink. Even the tongue sat perfectly still between his teeth. Soon, he had stopped talking altogether. It was as if nothing had ever happened. They may well have been complete strangers.

I guess it's over, Steve thought. Even when he brought himself to say it out loud, it didn't seem real. He still tried his damndest to catch the other boy's eye in hopes of him looking his way. He still expected to be surprised by a sudden kiss that left them both hard. He still waited for the next arrangement for a sneaky hookup in a bathroom stall or a parked car. He still fantasized about being grabbed by the throat, pinned against the wall, and taken roughly, whether they were alone in the showers or in a classroom full of people watching. Still, nothing came. *So, it's over. It's really over. Oh well. It was fun while it lasted.*

Soon, March had rolled by. Spring was dawning and everyone was talking about where they would be going for the week-long break. Many talked of going to the beach or going on vacation. Steve was happy to stay home alone, or at least that was what he told himself.

On the last day of school before the break, his mother knocked on his bedroom door. "Everything alright, caro?"

"Yeah," Steve lied. He hoped that she would not see the scribbles of godawful writing in his notebook or peg the name of Billy Hargrove as some unknown author or historical figure that he was studying. "I'm just doing homework."

"You've been very quiet, lately. Is something going on?"

"No," he lied again. "I've just been busy."

Maria smiled weakly and sat on the edge of Steve's bed. He couldn't look at her.

"Listen," she said softly. "I know that your father and I haven't been able to spend much time with you these days and that we can be too strict for our own good sometimes..."

Sometimes, he nearly scoffed.

"...but that doesn't mean we don't love you."

Steve stopped scribbling in his notebook and put his pencil down. He knew what this meant. Maria was a stern woman, just as Fred was a stern man, but deep down—*way* deep down—she had a heart. She only ever showed it when she knew that something was wrong.

"If you want to tell me something," she continued. "You can always come to me."

"I know."

"So what *do* you want to tell me?"

That I've been sleeping with another guy for the past couple of months and may have been dumped by him. That I don't know how to feel about him or about me. That I don't want you or dad to go to New York. That I need the both of you at this time. That I don't know who I am anymore. That I feel like I'm going crazy. "Nothing," he said. "It's nothing."

Maria only stared at her son, clearly not believing him for a second. Instead of arguing, however, she stepped to his side, leaned over his shoulder and kissed his temple. "Let me know if you change your mind about that," she told him. "You'll do that, won't you?"

"Sure, I will."

"Good. Your father and I have an early flight tomorrow, so we'll probably be out before dawn. You *will* be alright on your own for the week, si?"

"Fine."

"What was that?"

"I said I'll be fine."

Maria ruffled her nimble fingers through her son's hair and left to pack, but did not leave the room without one last word: "Ti voglio bene, Stefano."

Steve sighed. "I love you too, mama."

On the first day of the break, the kids had decided to celebrate their week off of school with a slumber party at the cabin. With Mrs. Byers busy with an extra shift at the general store and Chief Hopper working late, Steve was left to babysit. Mike, Will, and Lucas had brought their fair share of board games to play, Dustin an entire buffet of junk food, and Max a scary movie that she'd snuck past Billy's collection. Steve tried to ignore the heat in his cheeks at the mention of his name and tried to find a few healthier snacks for everyone to eat with very little avail.

The games were fun and Steve found himself learning more than he thought he would about *Dungeons & Dragons*. He felt like he was about to explode from all the snacks by the time the pizza had arrived. By near ten, everyone was huddled up to a movie that Steve wasn't paying much attention to. Something about a troubled girl who could move things with her mind. That reminded him: everyone was watching except for Eleven. Come to think of it, last time he remembered seeing her was when she ran off with a plate full of Eggos while everyone else was playing *Twister*.

Steve excused himself to look for her and found her in her room. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed with a half-eaten waffle in one hand and a pencil in the other, writing in a well-thumbed notebook while a hardcover book was levitating at her side and turning its own pages. He'd never seen her so deep into any kind of work.

"Hey, squirt. Aren't you going to watch the movie?"

"Homework," she said without looking at him.

"Yeah, I can see that, but you have all week to do your homework. Don't you want to hang out with your friends?"

"I'm almost done."

Steve took a step closer and looked at the book she was reading. His brow furrowed when he saw a glimpse of the title: *The Complete Fairy Tales* by Oscar Wilde.

“You’re reading Wilde now? Isn’t that a little advanced for you guys?”

“I like it. Billy gave it to me.”

Steve felt a jolt in his stomach at the very mention of the name. “Billy?”

“He likes books, so he helps me with them.”

“He’s been tutoring you in English?” Eleven nodded, took a bite out of her waffle, and kept writing. She did not look up at him. Steve wasn’t sure what to think. He tried to picture Billy helping anyone other than himself, but for the life of him, he could not. He could only picture the prick smoking cigarette after cigarette, chugging from his flask until he passed out, and banging his head to metal music that was playing at full blast. He tried not to picture him naked and hard.

Steve sat next to Eleven, trying to push the book away from shoving itself into his face. “Do you really think you should be hanging out with him? I mean, he’s not a very nice person. Your friends warned you about him on your first day of school, remember?”

For the first time, she looked him in the eye. “They’re wrong. He’s nice to me and he’s nice to you.”

Steve’s cheeks went red. What had Billy told her? “How do you know he’s nice to me?”

“He doesn’t say bad things about you, not like he says bad things about Mike, or Dustin, or Lucas, or Max, or his papa. He says bad things about his papa the most, but not about you.”

“So, he talks about me?”

“He tries not to, but sometimes he does. He misses you.”

I miss him, too, he wanted to say. "How do you know he misses me?"

Eleven frowned as if that were a stupid question to ask. "I missed Mike when I was gone and Mike missed me. Billy misses you when you're gone. Don't you miss him?"

Like hell, I do. I miss him like hell. "It's complicated, El."

Eleven shook her head. Once she had finished her waffle, she closed her notebook, hopped off her bed, and left the room to watch the movie with her friends. The book that was floating next to her slammed itself shut and dropped into Steve's lap.

Steve was ready to tuck himself into bed almost immediately after driving home from the cabin, but heard the door knock, and knock, and knock away by the time he was in nothing but an old t-shirt and pajama bottoms. *Odd*, he thought. He hadn't been expecting anyone and couldn't think of anything he might have left at the cabin. If he had, it must have been urgent, if Hopper were to abandon the kids in the middle of the night and drive through the pouring rain. Naturally, his first instinct was to ignore it, but the door just kept knocking until he could take it no longer.

"Alright," he grumbled. "Keep your pants on. I swear, If this is another one of them Jehovah's Witnesses, I'm joining. Anything to get away from this shit-hole town with its shit-hole monsters from its shit-hole parallel universes and...Hargrove!"

Billy Hargrove stood in the rain, soaking wet and shaking in his boots with his hands in his pockets. His eyes were red and there was an angry patch of black and blue on his cheek framing a harsh scrape. Steve could even see it in the dark and the sight of it made his blood run cold.

"Hi," was all he could say.

"Hi. Your folks aren't in, are they?"

"No, they're in New York. Why?"

"Can I come in?"

Steve hesitantly opened the door. Billy was slow in his steps, but looked around the house like it was a castle once he was inside. He looked strangely small. Fragile, even, like a scared little boy. Steve couldn't take his eyes off of the bruise.

"Come here," he said, leading Billy into the kitchen. "Let's get you something for that."

Billy followed and slumped into a seat by the dining table. Steve grabbed the first aid kit from the cupboard and poured a dollop of rubbing alcohol on a cotton swab. Billy winced at the first touch, but soon stilled. Once the scrape was cleaned, Steve replaced the swab with a packet of ice from the freezer.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Took a nasty fall to the road."

"Don't lie to me, Billy." *Friends don't lie*, he could almost hear Eleven say. *But are we friends?* "What are you even doing here?"

"I don't know. I guess I just didn't know where else to go."

Steve thought it best not to ask why he couldn't have simply gone home.

"I," Billy choked. "I had to see you."

"Even after...that day?"

"*Especially* after that day."

Steve waited and waited to hear an apology, but for a full minute, all that could be heard was the heavy rain. Even as he held the other boy's hand to guide it to the ice on his face, he waited. Nothing.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Steve asked.

"Not really."

"Of course," Steve scoffed and took the rubbing alcohol and filthy cotton swab away, turning away from Billy.

“What do you want me to say?” Billy stood up. “That I’m sorry? That I fucked up? That I’ll never do it again? ‘Cause you know that I will.”

Steve turned with wide eyes and a knit brow. “Are you threatening me?”

“No, I’m not threatening you, I’m *warning* you.”

“*Warning* me? I think it’s a little late for that, don’t you?”

“Oh, you think me beating the shit out of you was bad? You think a few punches to the face is the worst I can do? ‘Cause I can do a hell of a lot worse, Harrington. You don’t know what I’m *really* capable of.”

“And *you* don’t know what I’ve been up against! You wanna prove you’re such hot shit? ‘Cause the bat’s just in the corner of my room and I’ll use it if I have to.”

“Oh, so you’re gonna swing me with a baseball bat until I say sorry?”

“Don’t tempt me, Hargrove.”

Billy crossed the room in two strides and grabbed Steve by the shirt, pinning him against the kitchen counter. Their faces were only an inch away.

“Do it, then,” he hissed. “C’mon, *King* Steve, show me what you’ve got!”

Steve stood his ground. He kept his eye firmly on Billy’s. He was breathing heavily and his nostrils were flared like a bull’s until he felt a jerk in the other boy’s grasp.

“Do it! I dare you.”

Steve grabbed Billy by the jacket and kissed him hard. Until now, he never thought he could kiss someone out of spite. Like any that they’d shared in a stuffy closet, a filthy bathroom stall, or a parked car, there was nothing tender or loving about their kiss. There was only a battle for dominance fought with lips pushing, tongues shoving, and teeth crashing. The only thing that kept Steve from

losing his balance was Billy's hands gripping his hips, his fingernails digging into his skin, and his teeth grazing at his neck.

"Go on," Billy hissed. "Show me..."

"Shut up!"

Steve took Billy's face into his hands, not caring if he hurt the mark on his cheek. Taking the upper hand, he pinned the punk against a nearby wall and all but ripped his shirt open. Billy responded by grabbing his ass and Steve by grabbing his crotch. One seize, one snag, and one snap after the other, they stumbled through the room, leaving behind a trail of clothes until they reached Steve's room.

Once they were naked, Steve was thrown onto the bed like a rag doll. Billy was on top of him before he could so much as move, kissing him deeper and grinding against him. Both cocks, hard and leaking, were rubbing together and making both boys shudder.

"Fuck," Billy moaned. "Look at you, moaning for me like a little whore."

Steve responded by grinding his hips harder against Billy's.

"Oh yeah, you've needed this, haven't you? You've been desperate for my cock."

"Billy..."

"Not yet, princess. I wanna make you beg for it."

Before he could so much as whimper a simple "please," Steve was shaking like a leaf between every kiss that made its way down his front. Each one was deeper and more vicious than the other; a hard suck on one side of his neck, a teasing bite on the other nipple, and several kisses more until his cock was practically swallowed whole. Steve was already bucking into Billy's hot mouth. He wanted to make him gag. He wanted to make him choke. He wanted to fuck his face until he was in tears. Billy fought back. He inserted the first finger into Steve's hole without warning. It was the only way to get him to hold still.

The cock left his mouth with a wet *pop*. "You like that, pretty boy?"

Steve could only respond with desperate cries, while Billy's fingers continued to work their wonders. After one, two, and finally three fingers, were inside, the young rebel climbed over him and turned him onto his stomach. Steve bounced back like a spring and wrapped his legs around Billy's waist before he could flip him over again.

"Oh," Billy smirked. "That's how you want it?"

Steve nodded and proved himself by grabbing the other teen's ass with a firm grip.

"You're gagging for it that much, aren't you, you slut?"

"Please," Steve groaned. "Fuck me. I want you!"

Billy cackled and reached for a condom, smirking to find a full box in the drawer next to an equally full bottle of lube. "So you were prepared," he said while sheathing himself. "I think you were waiting for this. Slut."

Steve grabbed Billy by the hair, took a hold of his cock and pulled it into him. "Shut up and fuck me already!"

And he did. That was all it took. One harsh kiss and Billy was deep inside of Steve. Their struggle for dominance was almost violent, leaving bruises and bite marks on both boys. Hair was pulled, skin was scratched, throats were grabbed, and each thrust was deeper and harder than the last. Steve was holding onto Billy as if his life depended on it. Billy was moving in and out of Steve at a brutal pace and whispering the filthiest things into his ear. It wasn't enough.

More, his body demanded. I want more!

Steve wanted to dominate Billy. He wanted to top him to the ground. He wanted to take all control from him and grab it by the balls. He wanted to kiss that arrogant smirk until it was bleeding. He wanted to hold him by his ridiculous hair and fuck him until he was in tears. He wanted the pompous prick and all that he could give.

Billy let out a guttural cry when Steve's fingernails dug deeper into

his skin and left long lines of deep red down his back. He only stopped roaring when a hard hand grabbed him by the throat. Steve growled, wrestled him onto his back, sat astride him, and was soon riding his cock like a prize-winning stud. Billy was watching him with a mischievous twinkle in his wide eyes that matched the wicked smile on his face. His hands were all over him; his chest, his stomach, his thighs, his ass, his cock.

God, I love your hands! “Oh, God!”

“You like that, don’t you, princess? D’you like taking that dick?”

More than anything. “Yes!”

“Can’t believe we didn’t do this sooner. You look good bouncing on my cock like that.”

You’re so fucking beautiful. “You look pretty good yourself.”

“You’re a little slut for me, aren’t you? You like being my slut, pretty boy?”

I love it! “Fuck yes!”

“Touch yourself for me, you little slut. I want to watch you come.”

With one hand on his cock and the other gripping at Billy’s thigh, Steve arched his back and quickened his pace. Billy followed suit by grabbing him by the hips and thrusting into him fast and hard. The slapping of their skin was almost as loud as the strain in their voices.

“Jesus!” Billy growled. “I’m so close!”

“Fuck me,” Steve repeated over and over again as though it were a mantra. “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.”

The room seemed to shake when they came together. Steve couldn’t remember the last time he’d come so hard and Billy was still twitching against him once he had stopped screaming his name. When it was over, both boys fell side-by-side, slick with sweat and sex and completely breathless.

"If this is how we settle things," Billy panted. "Can we *please* have another fight?"

"Sure is a change from beating the shit out of each other."

Steve looked at Billy, who was glistening with sweat and laughing. It wasn't the wicked cackle that Steve was so used to, nor was it the mischievous chuckle that drove him crazy. It was a genuine laugh in his voice and a real smile on his face that he couldn't help but return.

I do care, he heard his own voice ringing in his head. *I don't expect you to understand what that feels like*. "I shouldn't have said those things about you."

"I shouldn't have pushed you."

"Truce?"

"Truce."

The boys shook on it and agreed to a new rule: any argument can be resolved with some good old-fashioned make-up sex.

Steve rolled to his side and rested his head in his hand. He watched Billy, as he reached for a cigarette. He wasn't likely to apologize and Steve wasn't expecting him too, but he did have just one question. "What were you and El-Jane talking about that day?"

"Is that her name?"

Steve nodded.

"She's a good kid. Kinda weird, but she's good people."

"Yeah, she is. So what were you guys talking about?"

Billy only looked at him for a moment before lighting up and taking his first drag. "Nothing."

Steve sighed. "C'mon, it had to be about *something*."

"I'm telling you, Harrington, it was nothing. The girl just came up to

me and we started talking. It was no big deal.”

No big deal, Steve could have laughed, *and now you're her English tutor*. Instead, he kept his mouth shut and watched as Billy took another reflective drag of his cigarette, his chest rising and falling at a slower pace, and his gaze softening as if deep in thought. He wondered briefly what was on the other boy's mind and was tempted to ask, but found himself distracted by how blue those eyes were. He hadn't noticed how bright they were. Steve hated to admit it, even to himself, but Billy was beautiful.

It wasn't until Billy looked up that Steve realized that he was staring. He looked away.

“You really look out for those kids, don't you?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“So, who looks out for *you*?”

The question felt like a punch to the gut. When he thought about it, it had only just occurred to him how alone he was. His parents were hardly ever there, the only girl he'd ever loved had left him for another boy, and while the kids loved him he was always their babysitter. Billy rolled to his side, facing Steve.

“You're lonely,” he said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

Steve took the cigarette from Billy's fingers. “I'm a big boy.”

“Oh, I think I'm well aware of that by now...”

Steve nearly choked on his drag of the cigarette from laughing.

“...but you've gotta have *someone* out there who looks out for you.”

“*You* look out for me, don't you?”

Billy snickered. “Me? I'm just the lucky bastard that gets to pound your pretty little ass.”

“But you look out for me. Maybe not the same way I look out for the

kids, but you do. I know that it was you who gave Tommy that black eye last month. You did it because of what he said to me on Valentine's Day, didn't you?"

Steve kept his eye on Billy, who would not dare look back. The very mention of Tommy Hill was enough to wipe the smug grin off his face. He looked as if he was about to say something important, but simply shrugged, as he took the cigarette for one last drag. "The fucker had it coming."

Before Steve could open his mouth to respond, Billy was snuffing out his cigarette into a nearby coffee cup and rolling off the bed to gather his clothes. Steve sat up.

"Where are you going?" Steve asked. *Don't go*, he meant.

"Home."

"You don't have to." *I don't want you to.*

"I'm afraid I do, princess."

"You can stay here if you want." *Stay with me.*

"Cute, but I thought we agreed: none of that lovey-dovey shit."

"*I want you to stay.*" *I really want you to stay.*

Billy froze. He was only just rolling his jeans half-way up his legs when he dropped them and looked at Steve. He looked like he was looking for something clever to say in response, but nothing passed his lips when he opened his mouth. There was little to no expression on his face, save for something in his eyes that looked almost hopeful; almost sad. *He's scared*, was the only conclusion that Steve could come to.

"If...if you don't—I mean, if you want to call your folks..."

"You *really* want me to stay?"

Steve gulped and nodded. "Yes, I do."

Billy smiled weakly. “Okay. If you’re gonna be a needy bitch about it, but no cuddling.”

Steve smiled back and crawled under the covers and Billy crept by his side. He was stiff when he lay down next to him and tossed and turned several times before finally falling asleep.

It wasn’t the snoring that kept Steve awake. It wasn’t the tossing, or the turning, or even the occasional murmuring in the night. It was the questions swimming in his head while he watched Billy sleep. As he was tucking a stray blonde curl away from his bruised cheek and tracing the little details of the pendant that hung from his thick neck, he found himself coming to the conclusion that after all they had done, he knew little to nothing about Billy. He wanted to know him. He wanted to know what his life was like before moving to Hawkins. He wanted to know where that pendant and those bruises came from. He wanted to know why he loved books so much and never told anyone. He wanted to know when he became the bastard everyone else saw him as. He wanted to know who the hell Billy Hargrove really was.

Shit, he thought. I’m actually starting to like him.

6. Truth or Dare

Steve awoke to an empty bed. His first thought was that everything he remembered from the previous night had to have been a dream and that the dull ache in his backside and lingering stench of sex was all in his imagination. His second thought was that his enemy-slash-lover-slash-friend-slash-whatever had left him, just like his parents had and just like his ex-girlfriend had. His third thought, which was what compelled him to get out of bed and pull on the nearest pair of pants that he could find, was that something smelled strangely sweet.

As he made his way downstairs, the scent was getting stronger and stronger with every step that he took. Finally, he had found his kitchen table set with a mountain of toasted waffles with berries and syrup. Billy was by the kitchen counter, dressed in little else but a pair of jeans. Although he was only pouring himself a cup of coffee, Steve had swallow the groan in the back of his throat just looking at him.

“You made breakfast?” was all he could say.

“Well, good morning to you too.”

“You. Made. Breakfast.”

“No shit.”

“I thought we didn’t do romantic gestures.”

“It’s not a romantic gesture, princess, it’s just breakfast. Eat.”

Steve could only scoff as he sat at the kitchen table and took his first bite. He was expecting the coffee to be burned and the waffles to be frozen in the middle. Instead, they were both hot and fresh. He wasn’t even aware that he had strawberries or blueberries so sweet in his stash. He couldn’t help but think of the look on Eleven’s face if she saw the feast before him.

“She’d go crazy over all this,” he thought out loud.

“Who would?” Billy asked.

“Er...Jane. She *loves* waffles. Won’t eat anything else.”

“She’s that little weirdo you mentioned last night, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Is she...y’know...special?”

“You could say that. Although, I’m surprised you don’t know more about her at this rate, since you guys are practically best buddies now. She says you’ve been tutoring her in English.”

“She was having trouble with a book project. I had to help her out.”

“And the writings of some gay Irish dude is the first step, right?”

“Bi.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “You’re leaving?”

Billy chuckled. “No, pretty boy, *bisexual*. Oscar Wilde wasn’t gay, he was bi. He liked men *and* women. Sure, he went to prison for sleeping around with other guys, but you can tell just by reading his letters that he still loved his wife.”

Steve found himself staring into space. *Bisexual*. The word seemed to plant itself into his brain and so many questions seem to sprout from it like the branches on a tree. He shook his head of them and buried his blush in his coffee mug.

Change the subject, he told himself. “When did you become such a lit-nerd, anyway? You never told me.”

Billy snickered and shrugged. “I guess it’s ‘cause of my mom. She used to read to me all the time.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile at the thought of a tiny Billy. He found himself picturing a chubby little blonde boy—though it was difficult to picture him without the mullet or the earring—being tucked in and read to by a beautiful woman with the same hair and eyes; probably the same smile.

“Where is she now?” he asked.

Billy didn’t answer. He simply stared into his half-empty mug and fiddled with the pendant hanging from his neck.

“Enough small talk,” he finally said. “Eat up. You’re gonna need it.”

“Need it? For what?”

“For the team, dumbass! You gotta keep your energy up; work on your footing.”

“My footing is fine, thank you.”

“Sure, that’s why you never learn how to plant your feet.”

“Well, *I’m* not the one who never shuts up during a game.”

“But I still kick your cute little ass every time.”

“Until you’re a cocky asshole about it.”

“Oh, you think you can beat me, do ya?”

“There’s a hoop around the corner. Wanna take me on?”

Billy finished his coffee in three hearty gulps and all but smashed the mug onto the table. “You, me, hoop around the corner, *now!* Loser blows the winner.”

Steve couldn’t help but smirk at the thought. “You’re on.”

Once both boys were dressed, Steve grabbed a ball from the garage and lead Billy to the hoop around the corner, which he knew looked as if it had seen better days. When he was younger, he would use it to play basketball with his father and then his friends when he was just a little older. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d played with it. Now, he was using it to play with Billy Hargrove, of all people. Somehow, it didn’t feel as unusual as it should have.

It wasn’t the first time the boys had played against one another. They had always played opposite teams, yet playing one-on-one seemed

different. "Plant your feet" proved to be a more useful word of advice than Steve had thought and Billy wasn't quite as cocky on the road as he was in the gym. The innuendos ranging from "Nice ball-handling, pretty boy!" to "Get it in the hole, princess!" were certainly new. Steve managed to laugh them off when he made his first score. His victory, however, was short-lived when Billy made too his first score, then his second, and then his third.

Billy had won three out of five and was practically dancing to his victory. Steve never thought he'd see the fucker look so happy. Truth be told, he was happy *for* him. He never thought he'd find himself smiling at the way his high school bully was jeering at him.

"That's how it's done, Harrington! That's how it's done!"

He kept repeating those words with every happy step he took until the door was closed behind him. Steve had Billy pinned against the door within seconds.

"Congratulations," he said. "Care to claim your prize?"

Billy's smile had immediately fallen into the wicked smirk that was beginning to grow on Steve. With a wanton kiss, both boys were soon locked in a now all too familiar embrace that left them both hard. They didn't fight or fumble like they had before. Steve wasn't as hesitant as before to grab Billy's ass, nor Billy to tease a nipple under Steve's shirt. They knew where to touch, tease, and tickle until their knees were weak. It was as if they'd been sharing a bed since they knew what sex was.

Almost like lovers.

Once Steve had fallen to his knees, Billy was exposed and hard within seconds and it wasn't long before he was all but devoured. Steve worked his way around the other boy's cock, tracing the length with the tip of his tongue and paying close attention to what pulled those cries from his kiss-swollen lips. Soon, he was taking Billy deep into his mouth and growling when he felt those clever fingers raking through his hair.

"Fuck," Billy moaned. "You're getting so good at that."

Steve could only moan in response, knowing that the vibrations of his voice would render the rebel speechless, but for wanton moans and groans. Billy's hips began to buck when a firm hand grabbed him from behind.

"Oh, Steve! God, you're gonna make me come!"

Steve took this as a warning and released Billy with a loud pop. He continued to stroke, but watched as the little beads of pre-come leaked from the tip. They almost looked like little dewdrops. It was strangely inviting. He couldn't help himself.

"What are you doing?" Billy asked.

"I want to taste you. Please, Billy."

Billy had never looked at Steve so earnestly. He only had to stroke his cheek to give an answer. Steve tried to contain his excitement at the thought of tasting Billy. He nearly gagged when he took the entire length into his throat, but soon remembered to breathe, to watch the teeth, to remember the balls and the frenulum. It was like riding a bicycle. As the younger boy's knees began to shake, like a dog having its belly rubbed, Steve knew that Billy was close. He did not take pity on him. Soon, he could hear his name echoing throughout the room in coarse cries and curses.

"Steve!"

Steve could feel the thick substance bursting into his mouth. Billy tasted bitter, salty, and sweet all at once. He was delicious. Once the young punk had come down from his orgasm, the older jock sprung back to his feet and kissed him.

"Good game."

Billy stayed for the entire day, not that Steve minded. Much of their time was spent relaxing in the heated pool, dancing like idiots to old rock vinyls, talking about everything and nothing over stolen booze and cheap cigarettes, and—of course—fucking like rabbits in almost every room. Much to his surprise, Steve liked hanging out with Billy,

even when they weren't having sex. Of course, he would never admit it, but the bastard could actually be a decent guy sometimes. In the back of his mind, he could just hear his old friends chanting: "Stevie's got a boyfriend! Stevie's got a boyfriend! Stevie's got a boyfriend!"

Yeah, he told the voices in his head. *I guess it kinda looks like I do.*

When evening fell, Steve struggled to find something—anything—to eat. He was not a very good cook, his mother had made sure he knew that, but there were some things that he could make. An Italian wedding soup would give off the wrong idea and he couldn't quite picture Billy thanking him for a puttanesca, regardless of its namesake. He checked his pockets and found the fifty bucks that his parents had left him in case he needed anything. Just enough for a take-out dinner. Taking the phone and flipping through the phone book, his first idea was to order a pizza, but he stopped at the image of a dragon wearing a rice hat. *The Lucky Dragon*, it read. It was a number for Chinese take-out. Steve couldn't help but remember something Billy had told him after the first time they had sex.

We'd sneak in, drink a lot, get high, fool around, and someone would always bring Chinese.

"Chinese, it is."

Steve was smiling when he made the call, but when the food arrived, Billy almost looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

"You ordered Chinese?"

"Sure," Steve said, as he paid and thanked the delivery man. "I remember you mentioning having it a lot back in California, so I thought you might appreciate it."

Billy smiled weakly and took his share without a word. Steve opened his mouth to ask if he had done anything wrong, but nothing came out. The younger teen had already sat before the fireplace, which they had lit up to keep warm after a good romp or two in the pool. He was quiet. Too quiet. As Steve sat before him and started to eat, Billy was staring into his box of fried rice, barely able to take in the first three little bites. It was on the tip of Steve's tongue to tell a story

or crack a joke. Anything to make the miserable bastard smile.

“Truth or dare?” he blurted out.

Billy chuckled. *At least it made him laugh.* “Really, Harrington? What are we, twelve?”

“Truth. Or. Dare. Take your pick, Hargrove.”

“Fine. Dare.”

Steve smiled, took a fresh beer can from the nearby stash and opened it. “I dare you to chug this entire can of beer in one go.”

“Kid’s stuff,” Billy scoffed, grabbed the can, and gulped the entire thing down like a man in the desert who was dying of thirst. The can was empty within a minute and when he tossed it over the shoulder, he did not look the least bit dizzy. He thanked Steve’s applause with a hearty belch.

“Your turn, pretty boy. Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

Billy licked his lips and fumbled through his pockets to bring out his flask. Steve remembered it from New Year’s Eve. Its sacred heart was glistening silver and gold with the firelight. “I dare you to chug this entire flask of bourbon in one go.”

“Isn’t it against the rules to repeat dares?”

“Just do it, princess.”

Steve shrugged it off and took the flask from Billy’s hand. He held his breath as he took the first sip. The burning in his throat was unavoidable and he was already beginning to feel dizzy, but Billy continued to cheer him on: “Chug! Chug! Chug!” He was coughing violently once he was done and promised himself that it was water from then on. Billy’s applause was drowned out by the harsh carvings on the back of the flask. Steve could just barely make out the words written in chicken scratches.

To Billy. Cali forever! Love, David.

"Your turn," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Truth."

Right where I want you. "Was David your boyfriend?"

Billy nearly choked on his next bite. His eyes were wide, his cheeks red, and his wicked smile was nowhere to be seen. "What?"

"On Valentine's Day, you told me about your friends back in California and you mentioned someone called David. I'm assuming he gave you this flask and I rarely see you without it, so I'm guessing it must be special to you."

Billy huffed and grabbed the flask from Steve's hand. "It's just a flask, Sherlock."

"But he *did* give it to you and it *is* special to you, isn't it? So, *was* he your boyfriend?"

Billy stared at the flask for what could have been seconds, minutes, or hours, tracing the intricate details of the sacred heart. Steve watched him intently, searching for any indication of an answer. Finally, passing from Billy's lips was a heavy sigh.

"Something like that," he said. His voice was so weak. "It's complicated."

"What happened?"

Billy only smirked and shook his head, as he took another large swig of his beer. "That's not how this game goes, princess. Your turn."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Fine. Truth."

"Pussy."

"C'mon, ask me anything!"

"Fine. Why were you so upset at the Halloween party?"

The question and the flashbacks that came with it startled Steve. "What?"

"Y'know, that Halloween party a few months ago? I saw you taking your little girlfriend to the bathroom after she'd had too much to drink. Next time I saw you, you were leaving pretty early and you looked like you'd been crying. What happened?"

Steve almost choked on the memory. He could almost smell the alcohol on her breath when he remembered the clouded gaze in her big, blue eyes. *Bullshit*, he could hear her voice echo through his head with swollen lips and a heavy tongue. *Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.*

"Nancy," he said, forcing back the swelling in the back of his throat. "She'd lost a friend not too long before that night. To be fair, I don't think I was as helpful or supportive as I probably *should* have been, but I thought we were happy. That night, things were really getting to her, so she'd had too much of the punch. I tried to help her out, but anytime I tried she pushed me away. She...she said our relationship was bullshit; that *I* was bullshit."

Steve was prepared for either a snide remark or sarcastic pout on Billy's lips. Instead, all he saw were the wide eyes and furrowed brow that almost looked like sadness, or something like it. The only word to describe it that he could think of was sympathy.

"I'm sorry," Billy said. His voice was strangely soft.

"It's fine."

"No, it's not."

"She was drunk. I was a shitty boyfriend, anyway."

"That doesn't make it okay for her to talk to you like that."

Steve hung his head, only to have a warm hand lifting his gaze to meet Billy's.

"You're a good guy," he continued. "You deserve better."

Steve wanted to savour the feeling of Billy's hand on his cheek. He

wanted to hold that hand in his own and kiss the knuckles like a lover would. He wanted to tangle his own fingers in between the clever digits. He wanted to feel the rough palms on his skin. Instead, he had to sneer.

“Who are you and what the hell have you done to Billy Hargrove?”

The wicked smile was back. “You caught me. William Hargrove is dead. I’m his evil twin, Barnabas.”

“*Barnabas!?*”

“Shut up, it’s Biblical. Means ‘son of the prophet,’ or some shit like that.”

Steve could only stare and shake his head, as Billy took another swig of his beer. “See, *this* is what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t know who you are half the time. One minute you’re this asshole who can’t even be bothered to sit through a class, the next you’re...I dunno. You’re so smart and funny and...well, I hate to say it, but you’re actually *nice* sometimes.”

“Those are some strong words, pretty boy.”

“But it’s true.”

Billy scoffed. “Why does any of that matter to you, anyway?”

Steve shrugged. “I guess I’m just trying to figure you out.”

Billy must have said something in response, but his voice had faded and whatever he had said seemed to go in one ear and out the other. Steve was too distracted by the hand that was now in his. He found himself staring into the open palm and tracing every detail, down to the broken heart line.

“Think reading my palm is gonna help you figure me out?”

Steve shook his head. “I just really like your hands.”

Billy burst out laughing. “My *hands*?”

“Yeah. I know it sounds crazy, but I like the way they feel and I like what they can do.”

Billy’s wicked grin had softened. He took Steve’s hand in both of his and pressed his lips to his wrist.

“Do you wanna know what else they can do?”

The sultry purr in Billy’s voice went straight through Steve’s body. He could feel the cool thrill unfurling from the pit of his belly that made his cock twitch. He nodded. Billy’s blue eyes went dark, as he leaned closer towards the older boy. Steve shuddered when he felt his warm breath on his neck and behind his ear, as he whispered:

“Lie down.”

Steve did as he was told. Billy climbed above him on all fours with the grace of a cat and ever so slowly began stripping him naked. There was no rush, no need to rip the clothes from their backs, and no desperate hunger for one or the other’s touch, and yet by the time he was down to his underwear, Steve was already hard. It was the look in Billy’s eye that rendered him at his mercy, the way he licked his lips, the way his breath hitched, and the way he touched...

“Oh.”

Billy’s touch was both firm and gentle on Steve. He began with a sinfully slow caress on the thighs, moving onto a playful pat on the bottom, and his fingertips just barely brushed the twitching cock. Before long, he was proceeding towards the upper body. Steve was almost certain Billy could feel the pounding of his heart when he moved onto the heaving chest, especially when he teased the nipples with his thumbs.

Eventually, he felt a hot mouth on his chest, just above the heavy heartbeat. Billy’s kisses were strangely tender on Steve’s body, though no less wanton than any other kiss they’d shared. His touch grew firmer with each stroke on every inch of exposed skin. Soon, those coarse yet feather-light lips explored his body from head to toe until

they landed on a sensitive nipple. Before he knew it, Steve was stark naked and Billy's hand was firmly wrapped around his cock and moving at such a slow pace. He then placed his other hand at Steve's lips, ordering him without a word to suck on two fingers before inserting them between his legs and into his hole. Steve swore he was seeing stars by the time those skilled fingers hit just the right spot, even if it was just a teasing touch. It felt like the world's longest tease to him and he didn't give a damn if it lasted forever.

For a moment, he could have sworn he heard Billy whisper something like "so fucking beautiful." If he hadn't been so hard before he would have felt himself stiffening into steel.

"Billy..."

Billy quickened his pace with every desperate cry of his name. Steve pulled him closer and raked his fingers through his long hair. He could feel a strong climax fast approaching and had to down out his screaming with a deep kiss.

Steve had never come so hard in his life. He was twitching in Billy's arms for what felt like ages until his body felt heavy, as if his bones had melted into his blood. Still, the younger blonde held him so close, almost as if he were protecting him. That, alone, was strange and the gentle kisses on his neck were even more unusual, but it was the whispers that lulled him.

"You're not bullshit," Billy said through slurred words, as if he had just drunk himself blind. "You're not a shitty boyfriend. You're beautiful."

Steve's voice seemed to escape him. All he could do was hold the other boy at his side and slip into a blissful sleep.

Billy was in the shower when Steve heard a knocking on the door. He furrowed his brow. He hadn't been expecting anyone and he hadn't ordered anything else to eat. Still, the knocking proceeded until he opened the door.

"Mama!"

Maria approached her son with open arms and a wide smile that almost resembled the warm beauty that she once possessed. She dragged her luggage inside and embraced him with a kiss on both cheeks.

“Hey, caro!” she beamed. “Did you miss me?”

I don't think I've had the time to. “Yeah...um, what are you doing home so early?”

“My conference was cut short. Besides, I wanted to see you. How are you? Are you alright? Have you been eating well? Are you enjoying the spring break? What have you been...? Oh, hello.”

Steve felt his cheeks burning, as he turned around and gulped. Billy was standing before them wearing nothing but his necklace and a pair of jeans. His hair was still wet and he had only just gathered a t-shirt from the floor. Steve prayed to every god that he knew of that it was the only item of clothing that Billy had gathered. Maria could only look back and forth between both boys.

“Stefano,” she said. “Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Billy's eyes went wide and a cocky grin was playing at the corner of his lips as he mouthed: “*Stefano?*”

“Uh,” Steve stammered. “Mama, this is my...uh, this is Billy.”

“William,” Billy corrected and offered his hand to shake. “William B. Hargrove. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Maria,” she said and shook Billy's hand, only to receive a gentle kiss on her bejeweled knuckles. Steve's jaw had dropped to the ground and his eyes had all but popped out of his skull.

“Maria,” Billy repeated. “What a beautiful name and what a beautiful accent. Where are you from?”

“Rome.”

“Ah, Roma. Stefano never told me he came from such a rich culture.”

Steve was staring daggers at Billy, only to be met with that wicked smile. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to kiss or kill that smile.

"Well," Maria smiled back. "He never told me he had such a colourful friend either. You are full of secrets, caro."

You have no idea. "Billy was just getting ready to leave."

"Leave?" Billy said with his hand on his chest. "So soon? But I haven't even gotten the chance to get to know the lovely lady."

Maria laughed sardonically. "I'm flattered," she said. "But I'm twice your age and happily married. Would you like a coffee?"

Billy's smile fell and his eyes widened. Steve opened his mouth before he could.

"Actually, it's late. I really should drive you home, *Barnabas*."

"If you say so, *Stefano*. It was nice meeting you, Maria."

Steve grabbed Billy by the arm before he could steal another kiss on the hand. Once the shirt was on his back, he was dragged outside and laughing like a hyena.

"Does your dick do all the thinking for you?" Steve had to ask. "One minute, you're jerking me off on the living room floor, the next you're flirting with my mom."

"Well, I had to do something to make it look like I *wasn't* just jerking you off on the living room floor."

Steve bit his lip to hold back any argument and looked around.

"You better go home," he decided. "Where's your car?"

Billy stuffed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "Back at my place."

"You mean you *walked* here?"

"Yeah, so? My old man took my keys. What else could I do?"

Steve didn't know how to answer or what to say. He could only stare at the bruised bastard standing before him and wonder what possessed him to walk all that way.

"C'mon," he sighed. "I'll drive you home."

The drive in question was quiet. Steve knew the route by driving Max and the boys through it so many times. They had always thanked him, but he wasn't expecting a thank you from Billy. Still, he took the smile as one. It may well have been the only thanks he ever get from Billy. It was enough.

They were only a corner away from the house before Billy told Steve to stop. "You can drop me off here," he said.

"Are you sure? Isn't it like a five-minute walk from here?"

"I can take it."

Steve shook his head and unlocked the door, thinking it best not to ask. Billy stayed in his seat.

"I had a good time," he said after a good long minute.

"Me too," Steve admitted. "You're not so bad company when you're...well..."

"Fucking your brains out instead of beating the shit out of you?"

"Not was I was going to say, but yeah. Go with that."

"What were you going to say?"

"Something like...I dunno, I just had a good time hanging out with you."

Billy stared for an entire minute, as if waiting for Steve to say something else. Anything else. Eventually, he nodded, unbuckled himself from his seat and left the car.

Steve followed him.

“Wait,” he called. “Do you wanna hang out sometime?”

Billy stopped and turned to him with a hearty chuckle. “We just spent *twenty-four hours* hanging out.”

“I know. Do you wanna hang out some other time? Maybe see a movie or catch a bite to eat?”

“Careful, Stevie, that almost sounds like a date.”

“Maybe it is.”

Billy’s smile fell and he turned to fully face Steve. “You’re asking me out?”

Steve gulped and nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

Billy looked to his left, then his right, and then behind him before stepping towards Steve. “What did you have in mind?”

Steve felt butterflies in his stomach and had to hold back the smile on his face. “There’s a drive-thru theatre not too far from here. We could go see a movie and maybe grab some Chinese. Say, seven o’clock this Friday?”

“I think I’d like that.”

“I think I’d like that, too. It’s a date.”

Billy took a step back and smiled. It wasn’t the wicked smile that Steve had grown used to by now. It was a real, warm, genuine smile. When he turned around, Steve half expected to see Billy skipping his way home.

“I’ll see ya ‘round, *Stefano*,” he called along his way.

“Yeah,” he called back. “See ya ‘round, *Barnabas*.”

Billy flipped him off without looking back, though Steve knew that he was smiling. He sure as hell was and couldn’t stop all the way home. He felt like a girl who’d just braved the task of talking to her crush and was still high on the thrill. He had a date with Billy

Hargrove and it didn't feel half as strange as he thought it would.

7. First Date Jitters

Steve had a mountain of homework to do before the break was over, but paid no attention to it. His mind was somewhere else entirely and not even the weight of several textbooks could keep his feet on the ground.

He was in his car with Billy, eating Chinese while watching that new *Friday the 13th* movie at the drive-thru. He was in the school hallways with Billy, holding hands in front of all of their friends and classmates. He was at home with Billy, having dinner with his family and sharing the most embarrassing stories from when he was little. He was in California with Billy, introducing himself to the old gang as the new boyfriend and showing David what he was missing. He was in a new apartment with Billy, just moving in to start a new life as well as their first term at Yale or NYU. He was in a restaurant with Billy, on one knee and asking him to spend the rest of their lives together in front of everyone. He was in a church with Billy, slipping a ring on his finger and promising to have and hold him until death they do part. He was in a honeymoon suite with Billy, somewhere in the middle of nowhere and thrusting into him while their now gold-bound fingers were entwined. He was in a house with Billy, watching their son and daughter play with their new puppy.

Whoa, he told himself. Easy there, tiger, it's just a date...with a guy...named Billy.

"I've got a date with Billy Hargrove."

Somehow, saying out loud made it seem all the more real, even if there was no one around to hear it. His mother was in the kitchen and his father was...well, wherever. It didn't matter that they couldn't hear him. He had a date with Billy Hargrove.

Friday at seven seemed an age away. The day itself was slow and tedious. By three in the afternoon, Steve must have tried on several outfits, until he opted for a pair of well-fitted jeans and that one sweater that he remembered Billy liking on him when they were fooling around in the Camaro. He couldn't help but smile at the thought of the possibility of feeling those hands under this sweater

again, of clever fingers teasing a sensitive nipple, of a sultry growl begging him to leave it on as he rode the other boy's dick in the back of the car. Whether that would take place before, during, or after the movie, he didn't care. He still had a date with Billy Hargrove.

Soon, it was six o'clock. Steve, well-dressed and ready to go, felt as if he'd just gulped down an entire gallon of coffee. He was practically bouncing off the walls on his way downstairs and even gave his mother a quick peck on the cheek, as she was reading a book.

Orlando, Steve couldn't help but notice. *Billy has that one.*

"You seem happy," she remarked, startled but still smiling.

"I am," he chirped. "I've got a date."

A familiar smile played at the corner of Maria's deep red lips. It was a smile that Steve could never really read, but he'd seen it often before, usually when she knew something that he didn't. "Anyone I know?"

"Maybe."

"Ma dai! Tell me."

"It's a secret."

"You've been *very* secretive these days, caro. You're starting to worry me."

Steve's smile softened and he wrapped an arm around his mother. "It's nothing to worry about, mama, believe me."

"Are you certain of that?"

"I'm certain. It's just...I'm happy. Let's just leave it at that."

Maria almost looked as if she was about to weep for joy. She took her son's hand in hers and kissed the knuckles. "Go on, then. Just be home before midnight."

Steve beamed and kissed his mother on the top of her dark head one more time before tossing on his jacket and rushing to his car. Maria

watched his every move before the door was closed.

They had agreed to meet at the drive-thru at seven o'clock. Steve had arrived at quarter to seven, however, and made sure to stack up on the Chinese before buying the tickets. Billy was more likely to sneak in whatever booze he could get his hands on, but if it was any more of that bourbon he liked so much, a couple of cokes couldn't hurt. Once he had gotten his hands on the sound box, the trailers were already starting. Steve looked around in hopes of seeing either Billy or his Camaro, but saw nothing. He checked his watch. They had definitely agreed to meet here at seven o'clock.

Maybe he's late, he thought with a shrug and proceeded to watch the trailers.

By the time they were done and the movie was starting, the takeout was already getting cold. *Oh, well. Snooze, you lose, Hargrove.*

Steve wasn't paying much attention to the movie. Something about Jason Voorhees coming back to kill a bunch of kids at camp, as he did. He blamed half of his disinterest in the fact that he hadn't seen the first four or five movies and the other half on the fact that Billy still hadn't made it. *Come on, Billy!*

Jason had just killed some goth girl while she was dancing. Steve could hear half the crowd either gasping or jeering. The other half was a bunch of couples making out in their cars. He couldn't help but think that he should have been among them by now. *Where the hell are you?*

Soon, the movie was over. Half the cars in the drive-thru were on their way out. Steve looked to the blank screen and then to the empty seat next to him. Billy was nowhere to be seen.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Steve jumped from his seat. He half-expected Billy to be the one at his window. For a moment, he felt a sudden rush of relief and wanted to jump for joy. His smile fell when he looked to his side only to see one of the ushers nagging him to leave.

“Unless you’re paying for the next movie, you better scram.”

Steve only responded with a cool nod and drove out of the drive-thru.

He drove slowly. Half-way home, he stopped to park in the middle of the woods. Their place, they began to call it. Their place to drink, smoke, and fuck while the stereo blasted rock music from AC/DC to Zootrope. When he looked to the empty seat beside him, he half expected to see Billy’s face looking back at him, whether he was laughing at his side with that mischievous twinkle in his eye or at his window begging to be let in from the cold. Instead, there was nothing and no one to be seen.

Steve began pondering all the excuses that Billy could possibly have. Maybe he had forgotten. Maybe he was sick. Maybe something came up with school or at home. Maybe he was arrested for speeding. Maybe he had been hit by a car. Maybe he ran into a gang of thugs who beat him up for money. Maybe he had been eaten by a stampede of rogue demo-dogs. Maybe he was lost in the Upside Down and couldn’t find a way out. Maybe he just didn’t want to come.

That was it. Steve had been stood up. Billy had no interest in dating him, just fucking him. It figured. Of course, he was just a warm mouth and a tight hole to the bastard.

“Fine,” he decided. “You could have told it to my face, you prick.”

Steve left their place behind and drove away. He was seething on his way home and had to take a deep breath before practicing a smile before his mother. He had just told her that he was happy; that *someone* made him happy. No way in hell was he going to say that and then admit to being stood up.

“I had a great time, mama. Yes, the movie was fun. No, I’m not going to kiss and tell. It was our first date and I really like this person. At least, I think I do. Fuck, I hate him!”

Steve took a deep breath and parked his car. He could hear mumbling from outside the front door. It almost sounded like an argument. Was something wrong? Was it something about work? Was

his dad suddenly home?

He shrugged it off and opened the door. "I'm home!"

"Stefano!" Maria cried. Her eyes were wide and her hands shaking. The phone was pressed firmly to her ear. "Yes, he's back. I'll tell him."

"Tell me what?"

"Maxine, calm down. He's right here."

Max? "Mama, what's going on?"

Maria marched towards her son in two strides and gave him the phone.

"Max?" he said. "What is it?"

"S-Steve," Max's voice was shaking on the other end of the line. "I... you n-need to come here. *Now!*"

"Why? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yes. I mean, n-no, I...it...it's Billy."

Steve felt a jolt in his stomach at the very mention of Billy's name. "What about him?"

"My step-dad, I mean our dad...h-he...he just...we're in the hospital...I..."

"Max, calm down. Breathe, okay? Tell me what happened."

He could hear Max sobbing between heavy breaths. "Billy's hurt."

Steve burst through the doors. Rushing through the crowd of doctors, nurses, and patients, he was out of breath by the time he reached the receptionist's desk.

"I'm," he panted heavily, "looking...for...William Hargrove."

The receptionist searched through her files at a snail's pace and while Steve took the moment to catch his breath, he was fighting the urge to snap at her. After she went through paper after paper and call after call, she looked to him.

"Sorry about that," she said with a smile that Steve wanted to slap silly. "Mr. Hargrove is in room 309. Third floor and to the left."

Steve barely breathed a quick "thank you" and ran for the elevator. He had almost passed out once the doors were closed, but refused to fall. Once he had reached the third floor, he rushed through the hallways until he nearly missed Billy's room. When he looked back, he just barely recognized the blonde boy laying still on the hospital bed. He was sound asleep, but looked near dead. His once pretty face was so swollen and so twisted that it hardly even resembled a face at all. There were only cuts, scrapes, and bruises. All that seemed to hold him together were the stitches on his skin and the wires attached to his broken body.

"Billy," Steve choked.

"Steve?" he heard Max sobbing. Before he could look up to find her in the corner, he felt her tiny body suddenly wrapping around his waist in a tight hug. He could barely breathe and couldn't tell if it was due to the little tomboy hugging him or the painful swell in the back of his throat from seeing Billy.

"W-what...what happened? Where's your mom?"

Max finally released Steve and looked up to him with bright, red, tear-soaked eyes. "S-she's in the hallway. Hops said he needed to talk to her."

"Hopper's here? What happened?"

"Neil, I mean Billy's dad...my step-dad..."

Steve was certain that Max was trying to say something, but her words were like riddles. Soon, the realization in him began to take the shape of a great monster rising from the deep and casting a long, dark, and horrible shadow. The fat lip, the broken wrist, the black

eye.

“Oh, God!”

Steve’s legs began to feel weak and he all but collapsed into the nearest chair. Max sat by his side. They sat in silence just watching the broken boy before them.

“Does he do this a lot?” he finally asked. “His dad, I mean.”

Max nodded. “It isn’t always this bad, though. Usually it’s just a slap up the head or something, but it hasn’t been this bad since...” Her voice trailed off.

Steve laid a hand on her shoulder. “Max, tell me.”

Max looked at him, then at her brother, and sighed heavily.

“I don’t know how long this has been going on,” she began. “I just know that it’s been going on for a long time. Billy’s dad, Neil, started dating my mom when I was nine. Billy was thirteen. I never really liked Neil and Billy...well, I always knew him as the bully in school, so I can’t say that I was too thrilled about my mom and his dad seeing each other. Then, they got married. They’d only known each other for, like, three months. That’s when things started getting crazy. My mom always went for assholes, but Neil was different, somehow. I didn’t realize how much until we moved in with him. He was an asshole to me and my mom, but Billy always saw the worst of it. I never knew why. Neil would always give him shit for the clothes he wore or the music he liked. I kept hoping that my mom would do something about it, but she never did. Things only got worse when he met...”

Max’s voice broke and trailed off. Her silence alone told Steve everything. “David?”

Started, she looked at him with wide, glassy eyes. “You know about David?”

“Billy...well, he mentioned him. He didn’t really tell me the whole story.”

He was expecting her head to shake or her jaw to drop to the ground at the very idea of the two of them hanging out together. Instead, she looked at him as if she knew exactly what had happened.

“No,” she said coolly. “I guess he wouldn’t.”

“So, what happened?”

“They were close. Like, *really* close. Billy was crazy about David. Half the time, he’d be away and we always knew he was out with him at a party or a concert or something. They did everything together. Everything.”

Everything, Steve thought. *Everything* we’ve *done and more*.

“I thought they were just really good friends. We all did. Then, one day, I went to his room to ask him if he could drive me to a friend’s place and...well...he wasn’t alone. David was there. He and Billy were...well...”

“Fooling around?”

“Yeah. I still remember the look on Billy’s face when he saw me. He looked so scared. I’d seen him take so many hits from his dad, but I’d never seen him look so scared. He made me swear not to tell anyone.”

“But you did?”

She sighed and nodded. A fresh tear rolled down her cheek. “I panicked! Neil was starting to get suspicious and he wouldn’t stop grilling me, so I told him what I saw. Then he grabbed Billy and slammed him against the wall and...he...”

Max burst into tears. Steve rubbed her back, but was secretly fighting the urge to swing his bat at Neil for whatever he had done. When he looked at Billy’s broken form, he felt his blood boil. He could only imagine what the son of a bitch was capable of.

It took five straight minutes of crying for Max to be able to speak again. “When mom and I took him to the hospital, we could barely recognize him. Half his face was swollen and he could barely move. I

thought he was gonna die! When the doctor asked what happened, mom just said he'd gotten into a fight. I wanted to tell them the truth, but I got scared. I already told the truth once and it got my brother beaten to a pulp! So I kept my mouth shut. Once Billy was recovered, Neil said that we were moving here. He didn't say why, but we all knew."

Steve opened his mouth to speak, but could only come out with hollow gasps. "What happened to David?"

"I don't know," Max shrugged. "Billy hasn't even mentioned him since then. He just blamed me for the move and he still does."

"Why does he blame you?"

Max rolled her eyes. "Because *I'm* the one who caught him and ratted him out, *I'm* the reason we moved here, and *I'm* the one who split him and David up."

"Hey," Steve cooed, hugging the girl to his side. "This wasn't your fault."

She continued to cry for some time until she caught her breath again.

"Max, can you tell me why Neil beat Billy up this time?"

Max nodded. "They were in a fight just a couple of days ago. I don't even know what it was about, but Neil punched Billy so hard in the face, I could already see the black eye coming. Billy ran up to his room and wouldn't come out for dinner. That's when we found out that he'd snuck out the window. He was gone all night, all day, and he didn't come back until late the next night. We had no idea where he was and we were worried sick. Neil was furious when he got home. He beat him up pretty bad, but tonight...tonight, it got worse.

"Billy said he had a date. Neil wasn't having it and said that he wasn't going anywhere. They kept arguing and arguing until Billy tried to storm out, but Neil was too fast. He..."

The rest of Max's sobs were drowned out by the thoughts swimming in Steve's head. His heart suddenly felt so heavy that it may well have dropped dead into the pit of his stomach.

“Oh, no. No, no, no...”

Max furrowed her brow. “What?”

“I know where he was that whole time.”

“You do? Where was he?”

Steve took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in his throat. “He was at my place.”

8. Tell Me A Story

“Can you tell me what Billy was doing at your place?”

“No comment.”

“Can you tell me why Billy was at your place?”

“No comment.”

“Can you tell me why Billy stayed the night at your place?”

“No comment.”

Click.

Steve continued to hug himself in his seat. For the first time, he was able to look up and see Hopper holding the tape recorder in one hand and rubbing the bridge of his nose with the other. He could only imagine what was going through the chief's head to bring on such a splitting headache.

“Kid,” he groaned. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but when a cop tells you that you can say ‘no comment’ as much as you want, usually that cop is just being polite. You gotta work with me, here; at least give me something.”

Steve merely shrugged.

“You said that Billy was at your house, that he stayed the night, and was there for the rest of the following day, correct?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, what were you doing that kept him there for so long?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Does it really matter?”

“It would certainly help the situation.”

“How? What difference does it make? So he stayed at my place for a

while because he was scared to go back to that shitty dad of his, so what? Why grill me about it when you should be throwing that asshole in jail headfirst?"

Hopper kept a stern eye locked on Steve's. "Because," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't throw that asshole in jail until I know the full story. I need to know why Billy was at your place and what he was doing because whatever reason he had to stay for that long could help his case in court. You don't have to go into too much detail if you don't want to, but you do have to be honest with me because if I were in your shoes, I would think twice before trying to sass a cop."

Steve's eyes widened and looked to the tape recorder. He almost froze at the thought of his side of the story going to court. It wasn't until he thought of the case going well that he started to thaw. All he had to do was tell the terrible truth and it would be over. For all he knew, his social life would be over, but Neil would be in jail and Billy would be free of him. He took a deep breath in, as if he were diving into deep water, and nodded.

Click.

"Let's start from the top," Hopper said. "Can you describe your relationship with Billy Hargrove?"

Steve nearly choked on his answer. "We're...friends."

"Good friends?"

"You could say that, yeah."

"Is that why he went to your place?"

"I guess so. He looked pretty bruised up and kind of scared. I guess he couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

"Had you seen him looking bruised up before?"

"Yes. A few times."

"Did you have any idea he was being abused?"

"No. He never told me."

"Did you invite Billy to stay the night at your place?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me why?"

"I wanted him to stay."

"And he stayed the rest of the next day with you?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing?"

"Just hanging out, playing basketball, listening to music, eating, drinking...having sex."

Hopper when completely still. He stared at the teenager with a stern glance. Steve could only stare back. He felt as if he were dealing with the older man.

"What time did Billy leave?"

Steve sighed heavily. "About 7 o'clock. He didn't have his car with him, so I drove him home."

"And that was the last time you saw him before his father attacked him?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me where you were during that time?"

"I was at the drive-thru theatre, waiting for him. We'd agreed to see a movie together."

Hopper cleared his throat and pressed the record button. "Good," he said. "That's all I needed to hear."

Steve wasn't sure if he should have felt solaced or stunned. "That's it?"

“That’s it.”

He was expecting a long line of questions to string from the older cop’s mouth. Instead, Hopper remained silent. Steve held his breath, anticipating a sudden explosion of harsh words jumbling into a rant on how stupid he’d been. Still, there was nothing. Hopper simply fiddled with the tape recorder and shooed him away.

“Well?” Steve urged.

“Well, what?”

“You’re not gonna scold me for anything, tell me what an idiot I am for...you know...”

Hopper’s eyes widened. “I do think you’re an idiot, but you’re not an idiot for sleeping with someone; just an idiot in general.”

Steve hung his head, but couldn’t help but laugh. It was the first time he’d laughed in what felt like ages. “So you’re not mad at me?”

“I’m not your mom, kid. Speaking of which, go home.”

Steve nodded and left the room. He felt strangely lighter than he had before and almost felt as if he were taking his first breath of fresh air after nearly drowning. For once in what felt like ages, he felt a certain sense of peace. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d talked to someone without feeling the need to lie or keep his mouth shut.

On his way out, he passed by Billy’s room. Billy was alone, save for the nurse that was tending to him, and was still unconscious. Steve took one step through the door and knocked gently.

“Hey,” he said. “How’s he doing?”

The nurse, a fair-haired woman with bright eyes, faced him and just barely seemed able to smile. “He’s suffered some serious head trauma and from the looks of it, it isn’t his first.”

“But he’ll be okay, right?”

“It’s hard to say right now.”

“What do you mean?”

The nurse sighed heavily. “The head trauma’s caused him to slip into a coma.”

The words echoed through Steve’s brain and drowned out the sound of the nurse’s voice, as she continued to explain Billy’s condition in words that he didn’t understand. Anything she had to say seemed to go in one ear and out the other until he was stammering. “S-so he might not wake up?”

“We’re not sure. Some people have woken up from persistent comas, but others aren’t so lucky. With how many times Mr. Hargrove has been concussed before, it’s hard to tell.”

Steve felt his throat begin to swell, as he looked at Billy’s unconscious and unrecognizable body. The nurse watched him with a solemn face. Her gaze made him shudder.

“Can I...I mean, is it okay if I have a moment alone with him?”

The nurse sighed heavily. “Well, it’s a bit late for visiting hours, but talking to him could help. Just don’t stay here for too long.”

Steve nodded and the nurse nodded back before leaving. His steps were heavy when they made their way to the bed. Sinking by Billy’s side, he took a limp hand into his own. He half expected the hand to feel cold and lifeless, but even hooked with tubes, wires, and needles, they were as warm and rough as they were when he touched him just days ago.

“Hi, Billy,” he choked. “Yeah, it’s me. Don’t cream your pants; not that you could. I mean...Jesus, I don’t know what I mean.”

He imagined Billy smiling, laughing, and perhaps even making another one of his sharp comebacks. The thought, at least, made him smile in spite of his swollen throat and burning eyes.

“Do you remember that party on New Year’s Eve? Sure, you do. You said it wasn’t just a game to you. Well, this whole thing between us...

it isn't just a game to me either; not anymore. At least, not since you stayed at my place. I didn't tell you, but I actually liked having you around; and not just when we were fucking, you know? I liked hanging out with you. I know, it's weird, but you're actually not so bad when you're not...well, you know. Hell, I was actually starting to *like* you."

I think I was even starting to fall for you, he almost said. And look where it got you.

"I shouldn't have asked you to stay. I mean, that time we spent together was...we had fun that day. God, it was the best day of my fucking life! I just didn't know it would wind you up in here. I should have known. I've been so stupid. I noticed all those times you'd been hurt and I could have done something. I *should* have done something. I should have just let you go that night."

If I'd just let you go, that bastard wouldn't have hurt you.

"I'm sorry, Billy. I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking..."

Steve's voice had trailed into nothing more than hushed sobs. He held Billy's hand as tightly as he could. For a moment, he thought he could feel the other boy's grip on his own hand. It wasn't the firm grip that he was used to, but a gentle squeeze. He wasn't sure if it was a response or a sign of life until he heard inaudible moans.

"Ss...S-Ste...Steve..."

"I'm right here."

Steve took Billy's hand in both of his own and watched him stumble and stir until he slowly calmed down. Soon, he was fast asleep. He looked so peaceful, in spite of all the cuts and bruises on his face.

"Excuse me," the nurse called quietly from the door. "Visiting hours are over."

"Just one more minute?"

The nurse smiled weakly and nodded before leaving them be.

Steve looked back at the open door. Any other nurse or doctor was either too busy or too tired to look his way. No one was looking. Looking back to Billy, he leaned over to hover above the sleeping teen and gently kissed his cheek.

He thought to say something before he left, but didn't know what to say. *Get better soon. Don't leave me. I love you.* "G'night, Billy."

Before he left the hospital, Steve found the fair-haired nurse in the hallway and stopped on his tracks.

"If it's not too much to ask," he said softly. "Can I leave my number here? I just want to know if anything happens to him."

"Of course."

The nurse gave him a pen and a piece of paper. His hand was shaking when he wrote down his name and phone number.

"Is he a good friend of yours?" the nurse asked.

"Yeah," he had to admit. "A *really* good friend."

The following Monday was a special kind of hell for Steve. His mother said nothing of him coming home so late and stared at him while he tried to eat his breakfast before leaving without a word. He drove the kids to school, as he usually did, but said nothing to them. Anything they had to say to him went in one ear and out the other. El, however, didn't say a word. She just stared at him throughout the ride until it was time to go to school. When he made his way into the building he had to drag his seemingly heavy feet into the building. He felt strangely naked under the gaze of anyone who laid an eye on him. What they were thinking, he didn't know, but he did know what they were saying in the hallways.

"Did you hear about Billy?" they whispered. "He's in the hospital."

"I heard he was in an accident."

"I heard he got into a fight."

“I heard he ran into a bear.”

Steve sighed heavily. “His dad beat him up.”

He could feel the eyes of his old friends on him, but didn’t look into any single one of them. He didn’t care to. He simply rummaged through his locker, looking for nothing.

“Oh,” he heard Tommy Hill’s snarky voice. “You would know, wouldn’t you? Of course, you would, since you two have been getting so close these days.”

Steve bit his tongue.

“What’s the matter, Stevie? Worried about your boyfriend?”

Steve’s cheeks went hot and his jaw clenched. At the corner of his eye, he could see Tommy’s eyes growing as wide as saucers.

“Holy shit!” he chuckled. “Really? You and Hargrove?”

“Shut up, Hill.”

“I was only kidding when I called him your boyfriend, but I never thought...”

“I said: shut up.”

“Or what? You gonna hit me or are you gonna get your boyfriend to do it for you like he did before?”

“Shut the fuck up, Hill.”

“Oh, wait! He can’t ‘cause he’s in the hospital. Probably with that fudge-packers disease that’s been going...”

Before Tommy could say another word, his back was against the wall. Steve had one fist gripping the collar of his shirt and the other striking him across the face. Within seconds, the hallway was echoing with cries of both horror and delight. Steve was deaf to them. All he cared to hear were the sounds of Tommy Hill’s cries of pain. His lip was bleeding.

Good, Steve thought. *It's better than what you deserve, asshole.*

He raised his fist to strike again, but felt a strong grip on his wrist. His entire body had frozen stiff when he looked up to see Principal Murphy's cold eyes looking down at him. *Shit.*

Tommy was sent to the nurse's office. Steve was sent to the principal's office. He didn't need a lecture to know that he was suspended. Once he was, he didn't go home. He didn't care to. God only knew the earful that he was bound for once his parents got the news. He could just see his father pointing and shouting at him for his now tarnished reputation as a good student. No way in hell was he going to Harvard now. He then pictured his mother with her ice-cold gaze that would soon storm into a full-blown rant. She would, no doubt, be slurring her languages together; something she only did when she was *really* angry. That he feared the most.

Instead of going straight home, Steve stayed outside and waited for the last bell to ring. He didn't have the energy to run or do anything else to keep himself entertained before then. He could only sit alone under the bleachers. Sometimes he cried. Other times he would simply stare into space. Every now and then, he would see staff and students passing by, all talking about Billy. He could hear them even from his little faraway space. He didn't know how long it was before he heard a friendly voice.

"Steve?"

He could have jumped out of his own skin. Unfurled from his little ball, he looked up to find Nancy standing before him with her books hugged to her chest.

"I thought I'd find you here," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Never better," he said wiping away the tears. "Just had to get some fresh air, that's all."

"Are you sure? You seemed pretty upset about what Tommy said about Billy this morning."

Billy, Billy, Billy. That was the only name that he had been hearing all

day and each and every mention of it sent a jolt through his stomach. He opened his mouth to say something about what had happened, but nothing came out. Nancy smiled weakly and sat next to him.

“Is it true?” she asked.

No, it's not true. It's just some rumor that Tommy pulled out of his ass because he was jealous. Jealous of what, you say? Because Billy was spending more time with me. Why was Billy spending so much time with me, you ask? He's been tutoring me in English 'cause it turns out the bastard is pretty fucking smart. How do I know he's so smart? Well, certainly not by sleeping with him for the past three months, that's for sure. “Yes, it's true.”

Nancy's eyes were as wide as saucers when Steve finally managed to look at her. “Oh.”

“Oh? That's all you can say? Oh?”

“No. I only asked because I wanted to know the truth. I didn't think you would have been involved with him after...well...”

“After what happened at the Byers' place. I know.”

“Yeah, but then you *had* been spending a lot of time together. I thought you were just friends, but I saw the way you looked at him on Valentine's Day.”

Steve couldn't help but smile a little at the memory of that day. He remembered the way Billy actually managed to make him laugh when he was having a shitty morning. He remembered the fire in Billy's eyes when he promised to fuck him for the first time. He remembered being at Billy's place and feeling him inside of him. He remembered actually getting to know Billy for a brief moment. It was the first thing that made him smile in what felt like ages.

“Steve,” Nancy said softly. “I don't mind, you know.”

Steve furrowed his brow. “You don't?”

“No. I thought I would, at first, but not because you're with another guy.”

“But because I’m with a guy like Billy?”

Nancy held her breath a moment. “Yes. I mean, we all know what he’s like.”

“He’s not always like that, believe me. He’s smart, like *really* smart, he’s funny as hell and I know it sounds cliché, but he’s actually not so bad once you get to know him. I know that sounds crazy, but...I don’t know.”

Steve looked back to Nancy. He wasn’t expecting to see a smile on her face. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing,” Nancy said softly. “I just haven’t seen you like this in a while.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re actually happy.”

Steve simply shrugged. *I guess it’s been a while since I’ve been happy.*

“You like him, don’t you?”

I think I might even love him. “Yeah, I do.”

Steve wasn’t sure how long the awkward silence lasted until he felt Nancy’s hand on his. “I hope he treats you better than I did.”

“Wha–?” he stammered and shook his head. “Oh, Jesus. Nance, what I said that day after Valentine’s Day...I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I was an asshole. I was tired, I was frustrated, I was angry, and I took it out on you. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.”

Nancy smiled and wrapped her arms tightly around Steve’s neck. It took him a moment to return her embrace. Before long, he felt a fresh tear rolling down his cheek and falling onto her sweater. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had held him this close.

“It’s okay, Steve.”

When they parted, Nancy reached into her pocket and pulled out a tissue. Steve couldn’t help but laugh a little when he took it.

“So,” she chirped. “This thing between you and Billy; how did it happen?”

Steve took a deep breath and began the story from New Year’s Eve, then Valentine’s Day, and then Spring Break. He told her how his entire tryst with Billy began as experimental sex and soon developed into something resembling a relationship. He told her about getting to know Billy as more than just the school bully. He told her everything. Nancy listened so intently. Sometimes she would smile when he talked of the good times and other times she would gasp when he talked about the bad times. She did not, even for a second, show any sign of disgust, anger, or even boredom. She simply listened. Steve never thought he would be telling anyone about any of this, least of all his ex-girlfriend. It felt like the weight of a ton of bricks being lifted from his chest, one by one. It felt like he could finally breathe again. It felt good.

Steve couldn’t sleep. He was tossing and turning and his bed was either too hot or too cold. Too many thoughts and questions were spinning in his head and all of them were of Billy.

He may never wake up, was the thought that plagued him the most. And it’s all my fault.

The thought was shattered by the sound of footsteps coming from the hallway. Sitting up, he listened intently to those footsteps. He knew the sound of his parents’ footsteps. His father’s footsteps were slow and heavy, while his mother’s were quick and dainty. These footsteps were nothing like either of them. They were as slow as his father’s and as dainty as his mother’s, but not nearly enough to come from either of them.

Someone had broken into the house.

Steve reached under his bed, where he had kept his bat hidden.

Slowly and silently, he crept through the house and deftly avoided the squeaky step on his way downstairs. A small shadow was moving in the kitchen, as if looking for something. Turning on the lights, he swung his bat.

It was stopped by...something. Some invisible force.

The little shadow now took the shape of a short-haired girl, holding her hand up in a stop motion. "El?"

"Steve."

Eleven placed her hand down. The force that was holding the bat had quickly faded and Steve placed it down.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he hissed. "It's three a.m. I could have *killed* you! How did you even get in here?"

"The front door." She said it as though it were the most obvious answer and of course it was. "I want to talk to you."

"Well, you can't right now. My mom's home and if she sees you here, she'll kill you."

"I *need* to talk to you."

"Can't it wait 'til tomorrow?"

"No! 'Talk to me about anything you want.' You said that."

Steve sighed and listened for his mother. There was nothing but soft snoring and stirring.

"Okay, but be quiet. I don't wanna wake my mom up."

Steve led Eleven upstairs and into his room. As he did his best to avoid the squeak in his door. "Alright, squirt, what did you wanna talk about?"

"Billy."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Seriously? You broke into my house in the

middle of the night to talk about Billy?"

"Yes."

"Why do you wanna talk about him?"

"He's hurt."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Why?"

"Jesus, you *know* why."

"His papa hurt him. Why?"

"I dunno. 'Cause he's an asshole?"

Eleven furrowed her brow. "Asshole?"

"Yeah. Apparently, his dad's beat him up pretty bad a few times before and this time it got *really* bad."

"But *why* so bad? Why did Billy's papa hurt him so bad?"

"I don't know."

"You do."

"No, El, I don't!"

"You lie! Friends don't lie!"

"Jesus Christ, because of *me*, okay? His dad beat him up because of me! Happy?"

Steve sighed heavily and slumped onto his bed. He could feel a painful lump growing in the back of his throat and forced himself to swallow it back. Eleven said nothing and sat beside him. They were silent for God only knew how long.

"You're right," he finally said. "Friends don't lie. You wanna know the truth?"

“Yes.”

“Okay. Well, the truth is that Billy and I have been seeing each other. We’ve been meeting up a few times and I knew it was a bad idea from the start, but...I dunno, I guess I started to like the guy. I mean, *really* like him. The reason we didn’t tell anyone is because I didn’t want any of you guys finding out and he didn’t want his dad finding out. Big shocker, his dad *did* find out. Or, at least, he found *something* out. That’s why he hurt him.”

Eleven stared into space, as if to calculate everything that she had just been told. “But Billy,” she said. “He’s your friend. Why did his papa hurt him for being your friend?”

“Because he wasn’t just my friend. He was...is...well, he’s a little more than that.”

“More than your friend?”

Steve sighed heavily. “You know how you feel about Mike?”

El nodded.

“Well, it’s kind of like that. I know it’s weird, but that’s how I feel about him.”

“Why is it weird?”

“It just is. It’s hard to explain, but a lot of people don’t like it when boys love other boys.”

Steve was half expecting the little girl to gasp or squirm at the thought of a boy loving another boy. Eleven did neither of those things. She simply nodded.

“You love him,” she said. Steve did not answer. He wasn’t sure if he could or if he even felt the need to. All he could do was look Eleven in the eye. She only had to smile to let him know that she had the answer that she was looking for.

Eleven hopped off the bed, stood before Steve, and hugged him. Steve furrowed his brow, but hugged her back. She was so skinny, yet her

hold was strong on his waist.

“Thank you, Steve.”

“For what?”

“For telling me.”

With that, she parted from him and laid a warm little hand on his cheek.

“Sleep,” she said and she walked out of the room. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if she needed help getting home, but he kept his mouth shut. He knew her well enough to know better. Still, he followed her downstairs and simply watched as the front door opened itself before her. She smiled at him before leaving. The door had shut and locked itself behind her.

9. Wake Up

Steve woke up to the sound of arguing. This could only mean one thing: his father was home. He could hear his harsh voice and his mother slurring her languages. They weren't shouting, at least not yet, but their voices were stern. His stomach tightened when he heard the mention of his name. They were arguing about him and he knew exactly why. *Better face the music*, he eventually decided and made his way downstairs. Fred and Maria were at the kitchen table with coffee that was no longer steaming. Maria was staring into her mug, as if she were reading tea leaves. Fred was staring at Steve, his eyes as cold and harsh as an ice storm.

"Good morning," Steve choked and immediately regretted opening his mouth.

"Good afternoon," Fred growled through gritted teeth. "Care to tell me why you came home so late last night?"

"I..."

"Or why we just got a call from school saying you were suspended for hitting another student?"

"Dad..."

"Or even why you've been missing so many classes?"

"Let me explain..."

"Please do. Explain to me why you're supposed to be graduating this year and why you can't even handle the most basic responsibilities. Do you really think this is going to get you into Harvard? Do you think this is going to make a lawyer out of you? Do you think these kinds of habits are going to help you succeed? What is the matter with you?"

It was the last question that echoed through Steve's head. He could feel his blood beginning to boil and his fists begin to tighten. Before long, his face was hot and his fingernails were digging into the balls

of his hands.

“What’s the matter with me?” he scolded. “You really wanna know?”

“Yes, son, I really want to know.”

“Well, I hope you’ve got all day, dad, because I’ve got a *long* list. My parents are never home, but when they are I feel like I’m walking on eggshells around them because they want me to be some carbon copy of my asshole dad, I don’t have anyone to turn to, my grades suck, my friends hate me, my girlfriend dumped me, and to top it all off, my boy—my best friend is in the hospital and might not wake up because of me!”

Fred’s eyes were as cold as ever and his jaw was clenched. Maria, on the other hand, looked up from her mug with fear in her eyes.

“What did you call me?” Fred asked, but got no answer.

“Your friend,” Maria said softly. “The one who came to our house last week?”

Steve ignored his father’s confusion. “Yes,” he said. “Billy. His dad beat him up for staying out for too long and now he’s in a coma. I’m the one who kept him out for so long, mama, it’s my fault.”

Steve could already see his mother’s dark eyes going bright with threatening tears, as she covered her red mouth and stood to approach him. She wrapped her arms around him and held him the way she did when he was a child. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d held him like this.

“Mio piccolo,” she began to sob. “Mi dispiace tanto.”

“You’re not the one who needs to apologize, mama.”

“What is going on?” Fred asked. His voice was rising.

“Fred,” Maria scolded, still holding her son as if to protect him. “Vattene. Questa faccenda non ti riguarda.”

“This is every bit of my concern. My...”

“Vattene.”

“Don’t you tell me...”

“Vattene!”

Fred staggered back and reluctantly left the room. Steve thought of this as a wise move. Anyone who knew Maria would know full well that she was not a woman to be trifled with, least of all when she spoke in Italian. She was a stern woman, but when she spoke in her mother tongue, she was dangerous.

“Caro,” she said, holding her son’s now red face in her hands and wiping away the tears. “Tell me what happened.”

Steve took a deep breath and told her the story: of Billy, of his history with Billy, and of Billy’s father. He did not dare touch on the fact of the other boy being gay, or the possibility of his own bisexuality, let alone the fact that they had been sleeping together for the past few months, though it was a tempting touch. He simply told her that they had, by some miracle, become friends, which wasn’t entirely a lie. Maria listened intently and took a deep breath by the time the story was over.

“There’s one thing I want to know,” she said softly. “Why was Billy here for so long?”

Steve shrugged, but tried to hide the warmth in his cheeks. “His dad had just hit him. I guess he was scared and wanted a place to stay.”

“So he stayed the night?”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s all he did?”

“Yes.”

“So, you *aren’t* having sex with him?”

Steve felt a hard jolt in his heart, as if someone had just punched him in the chest. He stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed at his mother, who

simply smirked.

“M-mama,” he stammered. “Wha-how did you...? *What?!?*”

Maria laughed softly. “Did you really think I didn’t notice anything when I came home to see another boy walking half-naked in my house? Caro, I could *smell* it.”

“Oh, God!” Steve burying his now red-hot face in his arms and had no desire at all to emerge. This was the end of his life, for all he knew. His school life had ended, his social life had ended, his love life had likely ended, and now his family life was about to end. He wanted to die. Until he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“I saw the way he looked at you as well,” she continued. “And the way you looked at him. I also know that it was him you were going out with that night. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen you so happy and I can’t say that I blame you. For as troubled as he is, he’s a very handsome young man.”

Steve finally emerged and it felt like breathing again. “You...you don’t mind?”

“Of course not! Perhaps I did, at first, but then I saw the way the two of you connected with each other and it was the happiest I’d seen you in such a long time. I may not understand it, still, but if it makes you happy then I’d be willing to at least try to. Billy *does* make you happy, doesn’t he?”

Steve thought a moment. “Yeah, he really does.”

“That’s all I want for you, caro.”

Maria smiled and stroked her son’s cheek. Before too long, Steve found himself returning that smile. It was the first time he’d smiled in what felt like ages. Soon, he was leaning into his mother’s arms and holding her the way she was holding him.

“Ti voglio bene, mama.”

Maria made a sound that seemed to lie somewhere in between a laugh and a sob and kissed her son’s temple. “Anche io, Stefano.”

Steve held his mother for a long time. So long that he seemed almost deaf to the sound of the phone ringing or his father calling his name until he felt a tap on the shoulder. He turned to meet his father, who had since softened from less than an hour ago.

“Steve,” he said. “The phone is for you. It’s someone from the hospital.”

Feeling a sudden rush, Steve raced towards the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” said a female voice. “Is this Steve Harrington?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’m Natalie; the nurse from the other night. You asked me to give you a call if anything happened to Billy Hargrove.”

“Yes, I did. How’s he doing? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” the nurse named Natalie said with the slightest hint of a laugh. “He’s awake.”

Maria drove Steve to the hospital. He felt somewhat ridiculous holding such a large bouquet intended for another guy, but his mother had insisted that he bring flowers. She followed him into the hospital, but stopped by the time they reached the third floor.

“Do you need me?” she asked.

Steve shook his head. “I think I need to do this on my own.”

Maria smiled weakly and stroked his cheek. “If you *do*, I’ll be waiting right here.”

“Thanks, mama.”

Steve kissed his mother on the cheek before gingerly making his way to Billy’s room. He couldn’t believe what he was looking at when he was at the door.

Billy was sitting upright, almost as if he had never been harmed in the first place. Eleven was at his side and resting against him, as his arm was wrapped around her shoulder. He was reading a well-thumbed book to her: *Jane Eyre*. Neither of them seemed at all recognizable to Steve. Billy looked almost like his golden self again, in spite of the fading cuts and bruises scattered along his body like the splashes of paint on an abstract painting. Eleven, on the other hand, was so pale and so fragile that she looked as if one touch would break her.

They looked up at Steve the moment he took a delicate step through the door.

"Steve," Eleven said. She sat up, though she looked barely able to do so. "Look!"

Billy smiled and gently ruffled the short curls on Eleven's head. Steve could only stare. "Billy, you're..." He couldn't find the words. "How?"

"No idea," Billy said. "I woke up in the middle of the night and *this* little squirt showed up out of nowhere."

Eleven was smiling so brightly, regardless of how frail she was. "All better."

"Well, not quite yet. We still need to rest up a bit, remember? Especially you, kid. Doctor's orders."

"Right. Doctor's orders."

Billy smiled and chucked Eleven's chin, making her laugh. Steve watched the two of them in awe, but couldn't help but smile with them.

"El-er, Jane?" Eleven looked up at Steve with big eyes. "Is it okay if Billy and I talk alone for a bit?"

Eleven nodded and kissed Billy's cheek before leaving the room. She walked slowly and seemed to only make it outside the door. Steve could only guess how weak she must have been when he heard her slump into a nearby waiting chair in the hallway. Steve sat before

Billy, who was snickering at the flowers he was holding.

"I know," Steve said. "My mom insisted I bring them."

"Cute. At least now the room won't smell so much of sanitizer and hospital food."

"But at least now you've got better company than doctors and nurses."

Billy's smile softened. "Jane's a good kid, isn't she?"

"She's great. Is that why you're reading from her namesake?"

Billy looked down to the book in his hands and caressed its spine. "It was my mom's favourite book. She never got to read it to me, but I always knew that she loved it 'cause she would read it every Christmas before she died. When I read it for myself, I could see why and even relate to the character, especially in the beginning where her aunt and cousins give her so much shit. When Jane came to me, she told me about her dad, I told her a little bit about mine, and then I told her about this book. She was pretty curious about it, so I asked Max to bring it here, so I could read it to her."

Steve's smile had faded. *So that's what you were talking about that day*, he wanted to say, but something else lingered on the tip of his tongue: "You never told me your mom died."

"Didn't I?"

"No, you just told me that she loved to read. I asked her where she was and you didn't answer."

"That's because I don't know."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"No, it's not, but I feel like I should have known. I don't know who you were before you came here, who you are now, or even who you wanna be after you graduate. Even though I know you better now

than I did a few months ago, I still feel like I don't know anything about you."

Steve wasn't aware until now that Billy was holding his hand.

"I guess I never really let you know," he said. "I'm sorry."

Steve smirked. "Do my ears deceive me or is Billy Hargrove *actually* apologizing for something that he did?"

"Don't get used to it, pretty boy."

Both boys laughed softly. Steve fought the urge to kiss the back of Billy's hand, as if they were lovers. "I'm just glad you're okay. I was afraid I was going to lose you."

"Not gonna lie, I was pretty scared myself when I started waking up and blacking out in a hospital over and over again when I *should* have been in your car at the drive-thru. I actually did want to go."

Steve suppressed his smile and tightened his grip on Billy's hand. "What happened?"

"My dad..."

"No, not your dad; Max told me about that."

"She did?"

"Yeah, she did. I mean, what happened when you woke up?"

Billy's brow furrowed as he began to stare into space. "It's all kind of a blur," he said. "I just remember being in a lot of pain, waking up in an ambulance, then waking up here, then everything went black until...I woke up. I wasn't in as much pain as before, I didn't feel as weak or as sick, I felt like I could breathe again. I remember gasping and choking on all the tubes and it wasn't until the nurses came that I noticed Jane passed out right next to me. She was holding my hand pretty hard, but she looked so drained and her nose was bleeding.

"When the doctor managed to wake her up, she looked at me, smiled, and jumped over to my bed to hug me. She looked like she'd won a

million bucks or something, she was so happy. The nurse tried to find another room for her, but she wouldn't take it. She insisted she share the room with me and...well..." Billy trailed off.

"What?" Steve urged.

"It sounds weird, but I actually feel stronger when she's around."

Steve's eyes grew wide and his jaw had dropped. He didn't know what to say. Eleven's entire story lingered in the tip of his tongue, but he knew that he had to bite it back as hard as he could. All he could do was stare out the door, where he saw El's little face peeping inside.

She's been able to kill people with her mind, he thought. Maybe she can heal them.

"Thank you," he mouthed to her. She responded with a smile.

10. Take Me Home

For once, Steve was glad to have been suspended. Nothing seemed worse than the thought facing another day in a school full of whispers and nothing seemed better than being in a hospital room full of laughter. He had visited Billy and Eleven's room every day, sometimes with Chinese take-out for him and a box of Eggos for her, as the very mention of hospital meals made them both squirm. Maria, of course, would always drive him to the hospital and back, no matter how heavy the weight of work could get and while she always kept her distance, Steve could tell by her suppressed smile that she could hear them laughing.

Before too long, both patients were beginning to look like their old selves again, though there was something different in Billy. He almost looked like a complete stranger. His smile was no longer laced with the sinister nature down to the serpentine flicker of his tongue. Instead, there was an unusual twinkle in his eyes that almost resembled that of a dove's. Even his voice was different. It was somehow warmer than before and seemed even lighter when he laughed. Steve knew exactly what it was, but couldn't put a name to it.

On Friday, the last day of his suspension, Steve wasn't sure how long he'd stayed in the room. It could have been minutes, hours, or even a day and he could not have cared less, as long as Billy was smiling. Eleven sat herself in between them to hear the story of how exactly he had gotten suspended.

"...and he wouldn't shut up, no matter how many times I told him. I just lost it. So, I grabbed him by his shirt, pinned him against the wall, and knocked him right in the face. The guy was bleeding before I could pack another punch. My hand's seen better days, but it was worth it!"

Billy rolled his eyes. "You gotta aim for the soft spot of his face with the hard part of yours. That's how you *really* knock someone out!"

"Whatever. It was still worth it to see the look on the bastard's face."

“Bitchin’,” Eleven chimed.

Billy laughed softly and ruffled a hand through the little girl’s hair, making her giggle. “Yeah, kid. Real bitchin’. What’d he say, anyway? Did he call you a butthead or is he graduating to fifth-grade level insults now?”

“Actually, he was more along the lines of calling you a f–...” Steve didn’t want to use the word, least of all in front of Eleven. The way Billy’s smile fell said it all.

“You mean...?”

“Yeah. I’m really sorry, Billy. I didn’t mean for...”

“You hit him because of *me*?”

“Um...yeah.”

Of all the reactions that Steve was expecting from Billy, a hearty laugh was far from any of them.

“What’s so funny?”

“That makes the two of us now,” Billy chuckled. “I guess we’re even.”

Steve paused and soon remembered the enormous shiner on Tommy’s face after Valentine’s Day. It was cruel, but he had to laugh at the odd twist of fate. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

The laughter and conversation died down to the sound of heavy footsteps making their way into the room. Billy froze and held Eleven closer to his side. The once warm smile that Steve was just becoming acquainted with had melted away into the familiar cold gaze. He almost looked like a bear protecting one of his cubs.

Before Steve could so much as open his mouth, his stomach jolted when he heard a bitter voice. “Billy,” it said. “How are you feeling?”

Steve turned to the open door, where a tall and pale man with more mustache than mouth stood before them. His gaze was more severe than Billy’s could ever have been and it made Steve’s blood run cold.

He did not need to be told who this man was.

So, he thought. *You're the asshole that brought him here.*

"I asked you a question, boy," said the man. There was the faintest hint of a smile on his thin lips, which Steve thought must have taken some amount of strength. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I'm fine," Billy said weakly. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother bailed me out."

"She's not my...what do you want?"

"I'm here to take you home, boy."

"I'm not ready to go home."

"The doctor says otherwise."

"I don't *want* to go home."

The man straightened and even through his mustache, Steve could see his lips tightening. Eleven covered her mouth and whispered something into Billy's ear. Her only audible word was "Papa." Billy nodded and held her to his side.

"So, what are you gonna do?" the man asked. "Sit here on your ass with a couple of strangers for the rest of your life?"

"We're not strangers," Steve had to retort, though part of him almost wished he hadn't.

"I'll just bet," the man laughed coldly at him. "Is this another one, Billy? Over the last faggot so soon?"

Steve could just feel Billy beginning to stiffen and half expected him to leap from the bed and pounce onto his father to attack. Instead, he lay perfectly still. Nonetheless, the man's cold smile fell. His body became rigid and his eyes wide. When he opened his mouth, the sickening sounds of choking overtook his words.

Steve thought to call the nurse until he looked to Eleven. Her eyes had gone dark and her nose was beginning to bleed.

“Jane?”

She was not listening. The man was beginning to look as he were being held by the throat with a strong fist. Billy could only watch in awe.

“Jane, stop!”

Not a moment too soon, the little girl’s body loosened and she began breathing heavily. The man fell to the ground and began coughing violently. As Billy held Eleven’s barely conscious body, Steve ran to the door.

“Nurse!” he called. “We need help!”

Not a moment too soon, the nurse—who Steve recognized as Natalie—ran to the door. Maria followed soon after and rushed towards her son. Another nurse was tending to the man, who pushed her away and insisted that he was fine. Steve, somehow, doubted that he was.

“Caro,” Maria said softly. “Is everything alright?”

The man looked to Steve, then Maria, and then back to his son. “First that punk back in California and now a wop? Some taste you got there, boy.”

Steve felt his entire body freeze stiff when he felt his mother’s hand abandon him. Maria turned to the man before them and raised a well-plucked eyebrow. Her back straightened and she smiled sweetly. Steve knew that smile. That smile meant danger.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t believe we’ve met. Maria.”

“Mama,” Steve whispered, but was dismissed.

“Neil Hargrove,” said the man. “I assume you’re the boy’s mother.”

“I am, and you must be William’s father.”

“Yes, I am.”

Maria flashed her most charming smile. “Li mortacci tua.”

Steve’s eyes went as wide as saucers, as he watched the insult go over the man’s head. For a moment, he wondered if he should have been covering Eleven’s ears.

The man furrowed his brow. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“A traditional Roman greeting,” Maria smiled. “It means good health on your family.”

Steve snickered, perhaps too loudly, and had to hold his breath to keep from laughing.

“Well, ma’am, it seems we’ll need that.”

Maria nodded. “Of course, God be willing. Toccalo di nuovo e ti ammazzo. Testa di cazzo.”

Steve could have kissed his mother then and there, as he watched her bowing her head and crossing herself, as if the wicked threat and insult were simply a kind prayer.

The man merely shook his head. “Well, whatever *that* means, I appreciate it. Billy, let’s go.”

“Actually,” Maria said calmly. “I think I can take care of him.”

The man sneered.

“No, really, I insist and that neck of yours does look a tiny bit bruised from earlier. You might want to see someone about that. Let me take care of the boys.”

Steve could see his mother fiddling with her wedding ring and wasn’t sure if it was due to the nerves of having to gain the man’s favour or to leave a mark on his hideous face from a hard slap. Either way, he almost feared for him. Almost. Eventually, he could see a smile at the corner of the man’s lips. It looked like a more sinister and serpentine version of Billy’s smile.

"You're not just a pretty face," he said. "If you insist, but I'll be back later to pick up my boy."

Maria smiled and nodded. "Vaffanculo."

When the man left, the entire room echoed with a sigh of relief. Maria turned to her son with a smile; a real smile, this time. Steve smiled back in thanks and made a mental note to make her next Mother's Day and all others after them particularly special.

Still, he couldn't help but dread the man's return, as he rubbed Eleven's back and turned to Billy, who could only stare.

"Do I want to know what she said?" he asked him.

"I *really* don't think you do."

Without another word, Steve walked towards the door and watched as the man walked away, ignoring a nurse's assistance. He wished for nothing more than to have his bat in hand and swing it at the bastard's head. Anything to keep him away from Billy. He looked back to the other boy and the little girl. The idea was swimming through his head.

Within minutes, he was marching through the hallway.

"Are you serious?" Hopper asked.

"Dead serious," Steve said plainly. "You kept El there for a year."

"I kept her there to keep her safe."

"Exactly! If it could keep her safe, it could keep Billy safe."

Hopper sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "He'll need an adult to take care of him."

"*I'm* an adult. I'm eighteen. I'll take care of him."

Looking up, Hopper's gaze on the younger boy softened. "Yeah, I guess you are. It'd be tricky."

“How hard can it be?”

“Famous last words.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Hops, *please* let me do this. Billy could have been *killed* by that asshole. I can’t just sit here and watch someone that I care about go back with someone like that, especially not now.”

Hopper simply stared. “You really do care about this guy, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Steve had to admit. “I really do.”

Hopper thought a moment and searched the teenager. Steve watched him and held his breath for what could have been a minute, to an hour, to a day. Finally, the older cop sighed heavily and dug through his pockets for his keys. He took one from its ring, took the boy’s hand, and placed it square into his palm.

“Go to the hardware store and get this thing copied. Then go home to pack your stuff, get Max to pack Billy’s, and bring some groceries. Don’t break anything, don’t lose anything, and for fuck’s sake don’t touch my gramp’s china.”

Steve’s face lit up. He was half-tempted to hug the older cop, but instead, he took the key and ran back to Billy’s hospital room.

Steve drove Billy to the cabin with enough medicine to heal a sick elephant and an entire list of do’s and don’ts for his recovery. Do maintain a healthy diet of three meals a day plus snacks. Do take medications with both breakfast and dinner. Don’t take other stimulants such as recreational drugs or alcohol. Don’t engage in strenuous activity such as excessive exercise or sex. “Seriously?” Billy groaned at the last demand. Steve had to laugh, though he couldn’t quite blame him for complaining, especially since recovery was said to last for a good five to six weeks.

The cabin was a tiny old house in the middle of the woods. As soon as the door was open, both boys were wafted with the smell of woodsmoke. The furniture looked older than they were and smelled

of dust. Half the wooden walls were covered in old photographs and plaques of hunted animals.

“Well,” Billy said, looking around. “It’s not the Harrington residence, but it’s not too bad for an old shack in the middle of nowhere.”

Steve smiled and dropped his things. “Hops said that there’s some food in the kitchen, but my mom said she should be here tomorrow after work with some groceries and Max’ll be by after school with the rest of your things. Speaking of which, since my suspension is over I’ll be back in school during the day, but I’ll be back with whatever homework you’ve missed.”

“You’re staying here?”

“Yeah, I am,” Steve nodded. “Someone’s gotta make sure you take your meds, right?”

Billy smiled and kept looking around. Steve trailed behind him and paid close attention to the limp in his walk, soon having to catch him when he lost his footing and fell weak in his arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine, pretty boy, just a little shaky. I could do with a shower, though.”

“Okay. Let’s see if we can find a bathroom somewhere.”

They did, eventually, but could only find a bathtub. It would have to do. Steve sat Billy down on the nearby toilet, turned the water on, and began undressing him. Perhaps he didn’t need to, but he felt he should have. He wanted to care for the other boy. Soon, when the tub was full and Billy was naked, Steve helped him into the water. Soon, Billy was relaxed and Steve was lathering his body with soap.

“I could get used to this,” Billy said with a smirk, which Steve could not help but return.

“Well, don’t get *too* used to it. This is just until you’re fully recovered. Could take a while, but...God, I can’t believe he’d...”

Steve's words trailed off. He could only stare at every remaining cut, scrape, and bruise on the blond's body. Although he tried to be as careful with them as he could be, he wanted nothing more than to find a way to somehow erase them and rid them both of the bastard responsible. He imagined swinging his bat at his ugly head.

"I could kill that son of a bitch."

Billy turned around, wincing in the process. He was, otherwise, entirely expressionless but for wide blue eyes. "Steve..."

"I mean it, Billy, I could. After what he did to you?"

"It's not worth it."

"Not worth it? Billy, he could have *killed* you!"

"I know."

"So why wouldn't you want him gone?"

"Because he's still my dad."

Steve wanted to argue even further, but could find no response. Billy slowly and carefully reached to lay a hand on Steve's cheek. "I've thought of it too," he said softly. "A couple of times, when I was *really* angry with him, I remember telling David about it and saying that I wanted to kill him. He said the old man wasn't worth going to jail for."

David. The very mention of his name made Steve's stomach jolt.

"Did you love David?"

Billy smiled weakly. "I don't think he really loved me back, but yeah."

"What happened? I mean...after you..."

"After I what?"

"After you two got caught?"

“How do you know about that?”

“Max told me.”

Billy scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Of course she did. Tattling little shit.”

“Billy, she only tattled because your dad wouldn’t stop grilling her. She was scared. You don’t think she still feels guilty about it? Fuck, she was in *tears* when you were in the hospital! Maybe she did something wrong, but she still cares about you.”

The bruised up blond had no response. Instead, he slowly and carefully turned away and returned to his bath.

“So,” Steve urged. “What happened?”

Billy sighed and leaned his head back. “He left me.”

“You mean he skipped town?”

“I mean he left me for someone else. Just like that. We did everything together and we had so much planned. Hell, we were gonna run away together. He was gonna be a famous rock star and I was gonna be a best-selling author. Then I came home from the hospital and he was fucking around with some bitch he didn’t even care about. He left me. He just fucking left me.”

Steve could hear the crack in Billy’s voice. He could almost feel the same swelling in the back of his own throat when he remembered every time he saw Nancy with Jonathan. Swallowing down that painful lump, he reached for the other boy’s hand and held it tightly. The hand he loved so much.

“I’m sorry, Billy.”

Billy held Steve’s hand in return. Their fingers lay entwined for some time until the water went cold.

“C’mon,” Steve finally said. “Let’s get you to bed before you turn into a prune.”

That, at least, made Billy smile.

Once the boy was cleaned and dried, Steve led Billy to a nearby bedroom, where he dressed him in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, tucked him in like a child, and stood to leave for another room. Before he could even take his first step, he felt a hand on his own.

“Where are you going?” Billy asked.

“I’m going to sleep.”

“You could sleep here.”

“Billy, you know what the doctor said.”

“I know. I’m not asking for that.”

Steve felt Billy’s grip tighten and then soften on his hand. Nodding, he removed his pants and jacket so he wore only his t-shirt and boxers. When he crawled under the covers, he was startled to feel the other boy’s body nuzzling against his own. Before long, their arms began to wrap around one another. It suddenly occurred to Steve that in spite of everything he had done with Billy since New Year’s Eve, they’d never held each other.

“What did your mom say?” Billy mumbled. His eyes were still closed.

“What do you mean?”

“At the hospital when she was talking to my old man. She said some things in Italian. What was she saying?”

Steve had to smirk. “Well, first she insulted his ancestors, which is the worst kind of insult where she comes from, then she threatened to kill him if he ever touched you again, then she called him a dickhead, and then she told him to go fuck himself.”

Billy’s heavy body was vibrating with his soft laughter. “Wow,” he chortled. “Your mom’s got balls.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want to get on her bad side.”

"Not if she can threaten to kill me with a smile on her face. Do *you* speak any Italian?"

"I can say some things."

"What can you say?"

Steve gulped hard. "Sono innamorato di te."

"What does that mean?"

The answer rested on the tip of his tongue. They were strong words that almost choked him. He swallowed them back and asked instead: "What was *your* mom like?"

Steve could see the hint of a smile on Billy's lips. "I remember she was really pretty," he said with a yawn. "My old man says I look like her, but I don't see it. Don't think I'm as fragile as she was either."

"Fragile?"

"She wasn't like yours. Never would've stood up to my dad like that...n' she was sick for a long time...but she loved me. She gave me this."

Steve looked down to see nimble fingers lazily fiddling with the pendant around Billy's neck. *So, it was his mom's.*

"Catholic," Billy continued to murmur. "She always saw the best in folks...wanted me to do the same...don't think I'm...good..."

Soon, Billy's body was beginning to grow heavy in Steve's arms until the faint sound of snoring buzzed was the only sound left. Steve began to stir, which only made Billy's hold on him even tighter.

"Stay," he heard the other boy mumbling in his sleep.

The word alone made Steve want to cry. For a moment, he could hear Billy's words echoing in his head: *Don't think I don't know what it is to care about someone just because I don't have anyone left to care about. He left me. But she loved me.* It all made sense to him now. As he planted a gentle kiss on the troubled teen's brow, he could only

imagine just how lonely, scared, and broken he really was.

“It’s okay, Billy,” he whispered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

11. A Fresh Start

Steve was true to his word. Every morning he would make breakfast, every evening he would make dinner, and with every meal he always made sure that Billy took his medications. Steve would do just about everything for Billy. He would clean him, clothe him, and care for him, even when he didn't need to. At school, he would collect his homework. At home, they would do homework together before relaxing over the television before dinner. At night, they would sleep in the same bed, but they never did anything except hold each other. For Steve, that was good enough. For Billy, he wasn't sure.

On Wednesdays, Maria would arrive with the groceries and would stay for the better part of the evening, either making them dinner or teaching them how to make a new dish, and always staying for dinner until it was late. Steve liked having his mother around and especially liked how she got along with Billy. She treated him like one of her own. Steve only had to look at the way Billy smiled at her to know how much that meant to him.

Eleven, who was looking better and better with each passing visit, was a more unpredictable visitor. Most times, she would visit when she needed help with her homework. Other times, she would simply visit for no reason at all other than to see her friends. Billy never once complained. She seemed almost like a little sister to him. Normally, Steve would leave them alone, but it was on a particular Wednesday that he had caught them whispering. Whatever they were whispering about, they seemed excited about it.

"What are you crazy kids up to?" he asked.

Both Billy and Eleven sat up straight as quick as a wink. "Nothing," they both said at once, but Steve could see Eleven trying her damndest to suppress a smile.

"Okay. Dinner's gonna be ready in five minutes."

The two nodded. Steve walked into the kitchen to gather plates, glasses, and utensils for the table. Maria was by the stove stirring the sauce.

“Puttanesca?” he questioned. “Isn’t that a bit strong for a thirteen-year-old?”

“Of course not. You practically ate your weight in the stuff at that age. Besides, I thought Billy might like it.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“The first time I saw him half-naked in our living room.”

Steve winced. “Goddamn it, mama!”

Maria laughed merrily and kissed her son on the cheek. “How are you two doing, anyway?”

“He’s getting better. A bit stubborn with the meds, but...”

“That’s not what I meant, caro.”

Steve felt his cheeks warm. He kept his eyes on the table he was setting, but could feel his mother’s own eyes searching him. She soon stopped stirring.

“He can’t have sex,” he explained. “At least not now; not while he’s still in recovery. That was kind of the basis of our relationship, at first, so I guess at this point we’re slowing things down.”

“Have you told him how you feel?”

Steve bit his lip. “Not exactly.”

Before Maria could get a word out, Billy and Eleven came into the room. Steve, feeling his face getting warmer, continued setting the table as they took their seats. When he was done, Eleven stood from her seat, grabbed Steve by the arm, and dragged him into the seat next to Billy.

“Um,” he chuckled. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Dinner went as it often did. They ate, they drank, and Billy took his

medicine, but tonight's dinner seemed different with both Maria and Eleven present. Stories were told and many of them were of Steve. Maria, naturally, told several stories of when her boy was younger and did not shy away from the more embarrassing stories from when he was even younger. Steve could only hide his now scarlet face and laugh. The warm feeling of Billy's hand resting on his thigh calmed him, though part of him simply missed how that hand felt on his body. Eleven watched them both with a smile on her face.

When dinner was over, Steve stood to put everything away, but was stopped by two heavy hands.

"Oh no you don't," Billy jested. "You're not doing any more work."

"But I have to clean up."

"Jane and I'll handle it."

"Are you sure? I mean, you..."

"I'm not a *complete* cripple, y'know, I'm getting better. Besides, you've done enough."

Steve thought it best not to argue with Billy and instead watched as he and Eleven put everything away and cleaned everything up. There was something in the knowing smiles they shared that still brought an itching feeling inside of him. He felt that same itch later, just as their guests were leaving. Billy stopped Maria at the door before she could leave and asked her something that Steve could not hear. He only saw his mother smiling warmly at the other boy and digging into her purse for what looked like a good amount of cash. Twenty-five bucks, it looked like.

What was Billy up to?

School had changed in the past few weeks. It was certainly more peaceful. Most people concluded it to be because of Billy's absence. Steve concluded it to be because of Tommy leaving him alone for once. Classes became somewhat easier too. Steve, much to even his own surprise, was doing much better with his grades. Whether it was

due to his own peace of mind during classes or Billy's tutoring afterward, it had certainly earned him a pretty red A on his English essay and a compliment from his teacher.

"I never thought I'd see you analyzing Wilde, but I *have* been waiting a long time to hear your own voice in your work," she said. "What changed?"

Steve gave a simple shrug and said: "Lots of things."

He was practically skipping his way home. His heart skipped with him when he saw the poster on the wall. Prom was fast approaching.

When he reached the cabin, the last thing that he expected to come home to was an excited Eleven greeting him at the door. She seemed to have been waiting for him, judging by the book in her hands. *The Secret Garden*, Steve observed.

"Steve!" she piped. "You're back!"

"Yeah, I am. What are you doing here? I thought I told you I didn't want to see you skipping class anymore."

"More important than class. Come."

Before he could protest, the little girl took his hand and dragged him through the door and into the cabin, where table was lit with candles and set two boxes of Chinese take-out, two cups of juice, and two plates of waffles stacked with whipped cream and candy. Billy was sitting on one side of the table with a smile on his face.

Steve was stammering. "W-what the...what is all of this?"

"What does it look like, pretty boy? I owe you a date."

"Romantic dinner," Eleven chimed. "With triple-decker Eggo extravaganza for dessert."

Steve couldn't help but laugh, as he looked back and forth between the little girl and the other teen. "Is this what you guys have been up to?"

Billy simply shrugged. Steve looked down to Eleven, who was beaming brightly before she held up her book and took a step back. "Going home now," she said. "Enjoy."

But before she could step outside the door, Steve laid a hand on Eleven's shoulder, turned her around, and hugged her. "Thanks, El," he whispered softly and kissed the top of her head.

Eleven parted with a smile and left them.

Steve turned to find Billy smiling at him. He sat down and stared at the meal before him. He must have been staring for quite some time, as Billy reached across the table, took a piece of pork from Steve's box, and popped it into his mouth. He then took a nearby bag of soy sauce and sprinkled it onto both boxes.

"That's much better," he said. "C'mon, it's not poisoned. Eat."

Steve smiled and took his first few bites, but could hardly take that much. He barely ate much throughout the meal and spent much of it watching Billy wolf down the entire thing.

"So," he spoke with his mouth full. "How was your day?"

"Good. I got an A in my essay." *Also, prom's coming up, but you're probably not interested in that...right?*

"That's great! See, I *told* you that you could do anything if you put your mind to it."

"You have never once told me that, Billy."

"Yeah, but I was thinking it."

Steve chuckled lightly. "Well, I appreciate the support. I appreciate all this too, but what exactly is it for? Is this your way of saying 'thank you' or are you asking for something?"

Billy placed his box and chopsticks onto the table and looked to Steve with a faint yet warm smile. "Call it a little bit of both."

"I don't understand."

"Let me explain, then. For starters, I really am grateful for everything you've been doing and I don't think I've been showing it all that much."

"But you're still recovering. You don't have to..."

"I'm not finished. Secondly, I really did want to go out with you that night and I know you were bummed that I didn't show up."

"Billy, you had a reason."

"Jesus, man, will you fucking let me talk? I'm trying to have a moment here!"

"Okay, I'll shut up. Talk."

Billy's smile widened and Steve was certain he felt a foot grazing his own.

"I just mean to say," Billy continued. "I know that we agreed to keep things casual, but that was only because I wasn't over David yet. Still, I really did mean it when I said that game on New Year's wasn't *just* a game to me. Hell, I always knew you were a pretty boy, 'cause *fuck* I'm not blind, so of course, I was going to jump on the opportunity when you came back for more. We had fun, right? I kept telling myself that was all it was: just having fun. I didn't want to catch any feelings for you, but then you were the only person in this shit-hole town that I could actually get along with. I couldn't stop thinking about you, but I didn't want to get burned again.

"Then we had that fight and we didn't talk for ages and I missed you like hell. One night, my old man got into a riot and hit me real bad, so I went to your place 'cause I didn't know who else to turn to. You were the closest thing to a friend that I had. I wasn't expecting you to let me in, but then you were so good to me that I couldn't lie to myself anymore. I couldn't keep telling myself that it was just sex. Hell, how could I after that next day? I can't remember the last time I was so fucking happy just to be with someone.

"I'll admit, I freaked out a *little* when you asked about David, but I think it was because I forgot how much I cared about him and what

he did to me. After that day and spending so much time with you, I think I realized that I didn't have any feelings for him anymore. It felt weird coming to terms with that, 'cause he used to mean everything to me, but then you were there and it didn't matter anymore. I was *happy* with you. You were the only thing in this crazy, stupid, fucked up world of mine that made me happy.

"I was ecstatic when you asked me out. Christ, I had to fight my old man just to get out the door, but...well..."

Billy was silent for a long time. Steve did his best to suppress the warmth threatening his cheeks and the smile his lips. He shook them both off and reached to touch the other teen's hand. It was as warm and rough as ever as the thumb soon grazed his knuckles.

"I told Jane the whole story," Billy continued. "Well, the G-rated version, anyway."

Steve snickered.

"I never told her about the things that we did or the way I felt about you, but I guess she could just tell. She's a smart kid. When I told her that we were supposed to go out that night I was sent to the hospital, she came up with the idea to surprise you with a romantic dinner. She said she saw it on TV once and thought it be a nice idea, especially after everything that you've done for me."

Steve looked to Billy, then the hand he was holding, and then at the entire feast before him. He thought of the days before when he'd caught Billy and Jane whispering and then later when Billy had asked Maria for money. "That's what you've been up to these past few days?"

Billy nodded. "Call it a recrudescence."

"A *what?*"

"A fresh start. I know that the whole 'frienemies with benefits' thing isn't really ideal, so I was thinking of starting over."

Steve's eyes widened. "You mean...?"

"I can't have sex, at least not for another couple of weeks, but I can do the other sappy shit like dinner and movies. Even after I've recovered, I've told the doctor that I'm gonna get some therapy and I want to start looking for a job so I can afford a new place when I turn eighteen. My point is that I want us to start things over, but I want to do it right this time."

"You mean you want to go steady?"

Billy nodded again, this time with a smile. "Yeah, Steve, I really do. If you don't want to, I get it, 'cause I know that I was just an experiment for you, but..."

Before another word could be said, Steve lept from his seat, cradled Billy's face into his hands, and kissed him. There were no parted lips, no clashing teeth, and no wrestling tongues like any other kiss they'd shared. Instead, their kiss was soft and sweet, almost shy. Nonetheless, Steve could feel his heart race and could almost hear Billy's. As they parted, Steve smiled to see that Billy kept his eyes closed.

"For the record," he said softly, resting his forehead against the other teen's. "You were never *just* my experiment."

Billy finally opened his eyes. "Steve..."

"No, let *me* talk this time. Billy, whether we were friends, enemies, or whatever you want to call us, you were never *just* an experiment to me. You're so much more than that and I want *us* to be so much more than that. So, yes, I totally, completely, and absolutely want us to start over."

Billy was beaming. Steve kissed him again. They spent the better part of the evening just kissing.

They didn't make love that night. Instead, they shared the layers upon layers of waffles, whipped cream, and candy on the porch and watched the full moon float above them. Steve winced at his next bite of dessert and promised himself a thorough brushing and a much-needed trip to the dentist.

"This tastes insane," he said, nearly choking on a jelly bean.

"It's not so bad once you scrape out some of the candy and make room for the cream."

"Yeah, I know you like your cream."

Billy nudged Steve hard in the ribs, only to receive a chuckle and a chaste kiss. As Billy continued to wince through every last bite, Steve could only watch.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Clearly you just did," Billy smirked. "But go ahead."

"When did you know that you were...you know...?"

"Gay? I think I always knew. Even as a kid, I remember watching *Rebel Without A Cause* and I always knew that James Dean was prettier than Natalie Wood any day. I knew it was weird, but it wasn't really something I could help, no matter what my old man would say."

"Did you ever question it?"

"Not really."

"So you weren't even curious about girls?"

Billy shrugged. "I went out with some of 'em, just to keep up appearances, but I never really did anything with them."

Steve tried to imagine Billy with another girl and, for the life of him, could not come up with a mental image. He could only picture him standing before a suburban house with a white picket fence, wearing a nice suit, holding a wife in one hand, a child in the other, and looking deeply unhappy.

"Do you think you'll marry a man one day?"

Billy turned to Steve with a hopeful twinkle in his eye. "Maybe," he said softly. "If I *can*, anyway. Why do you ask?"

"I guess I'm just trying to figure it out for myself."

"Whether you like boys or girls?"

Steve nodded.

"Well, I told you about Oscar Wilde, right? I helped you with that essay on his work."

"I remember. You said he was bi, right?"

"Brilliantly bi."

"Do you think I might be?"

"Well, are you?"

Steve took a deep breath and thought a moment. He wondered if he was anything like the Irish poet. He was nowhere near as flamboyant or witty and had very little skill with a pen. He did, however, love Nancy as he would have loved a wife and he loved Billy as he would have loved a husband. "I think I am."

Billy smiled and caressed Steve's cheek and kissed him firmly on the lips. "As long as you're you," he said. "That's all that matters."

"Good," Steve said after one last kiss. "I want to ask you something else."

"You sure do ask a lot of questions, though, pretty boy."

Steve bit his lip. "It's just one more question."

12. Prom Night

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Maria asked for the hundredth time.

“Yes, mama, I’ll be alright. It’s not like it’s the first time you guys have been on a business trip, you know.”

“But tonight of all nights! Are you *certain* you don’t want us to book the flight for tomorrow? Because we can.”

Steve bit his lip. Dearly though he loved his mother, her company was the last thing he wanted for tonight. He certainly didn’t want his father hanging around either. All he wanted was Billy. He straightened his bow tie and cleared his throat. “I am very much certain, mama.”

When he turned around to face his mother, she looked as if she were about to cry through her smile. She looked her son up and down, admiring his deep red suit and baby pink bow tie. “Caro,” she near sobbed. “You look so handsome. I wish I could see the look on Billy’s face when he sees you.”

Steve felt an incandescent warmth swelling inside of him and smiled with pride.

“There’s one thing missing, though.”

Maria dug into her pockets and pulled out a little black box made of velvet. She handed it to her reluctant son, who opened it with caution and gasped. Inside was a pair of cufflinks made from two great rubies framed by gold.

“Mama...”

“They’re a family heirloom. Traditionally, they’re supposed to be passed down from father to son when the boy becomes a man. I never had any brothers, so before your nonno passed away, I promised him that I’d pass them down to you when the time was right. I think it’s high time that I give them to you.”

Steve swallowed the lump in his throat and wrapped his arm around

his mother. She hadn't held him so tight since he told her about Billy. "Grazie, mama."

Maria kissed her son's temple and placed the links into his cuffs. "I was thinking," she continued. "Maybe someday I should get a pair copied for Billy. In sapphires, of course, so you'll know the difference."

"Mama, we haven't even been dating for that long."

"You said it started in January."

"Yeah, but..."

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Steve froze stiff and Maria straightened. Fred was standing by the door with two envelopes in hand.

"Maria," he said. "The taxi should be here any minute, so you should pack your things before we head out. I want a word with Steve for a moment."

Maria nodded and left the room. Steve held his breath when his father slowly stepped towards him.

"You got a couple of things in the mail today," he said. "One of them is from Harvard."

Steve took both letters and opened the first: a rejection letter from Harvard University. He was strangely relieved, but then moved onto the next: an acceptance letter from New York University. His voice was barely audible.

"What was that?"

"I," Steve stammered. "I-I...I got in."

Fred looked happier than Steve had seen him in ages. "That's amazing! You'll love Harvard, son, I know I did. Then one day you'll be mastering the courtroom and..."

“Not Harvard. New York.”

The smile fell. “Oh...well, you can apply again next year. You can even take an extra year at school. Maybe it’s a little last minute, but I’ll sign you up anyway.”

“That’s just it, dad, I don’t *want* to go to Harvard and I don’t *want* to be a lawyer either. I never did.”

Fred swallowed hard. “Well, what *do* you want to be?”

“I’m getting pretty good at English these days and I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I’m pretty damn good with kids. I think I’d do better as a teacher.”

“A teacher.”

“Yeah, dad, and apart from that I wanna be happy. I’d never be happy as a lawyer.”

Fred smiled weakly and laid a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder. “I wish you had told me, but I’m glad I know now. I’m proud of you, Steve.”

Steve’s smile grew stronger. It was the first time he’d heard his father tell him such a thing. He half expected to be pulled into a strong hug, but instead he felt a hand leaving his shoulder and a man walking towards the door.

“Oh,” Fred stopped. “And one more thing: your mother and I have talked about this thing with you and...Benny, was it?”

“Billy.”

“Billy. Right. I don’t really understand it and I may not entirely agree with it, but whatever choice you make...”

“It’s not a choice.”

“...I just hope that the two of you are happy.”

Steve wanted to argue. He wanted to give his father a good hard

shake and at least *try* to get it into his thick skull that he loved the bastard. Instead, he sighed. “Thanks, dad.”

Fred nodded and left. Steve watched him down the hallway and down the stairs, where Maria was waiting with her luggage. As her husband opened the door, she blew one last kiss to her son.

“Have fun tonight, caro,” she called from the front lawn. “Be sure to take a picture and tell Billy I said hello.”

“Thanks, mama, I will. Call me when you guys land.”

“We will,” said Fred. “We love you.”

Steve nearly choked on his words and watched as his parents boarded the taxi and drove away, waving goodbye. “I love you too.”

Hawkins High’s 1985 Prom night theme was fairy tales. Steve couldn’t help but find this ironic, considering his rather un-fairy-tale-like date, but was at least amused by the irony. The gymnasium seemed to have transformed itself into what almost looked like an enchanted forest; make-believe princes and princesses were surrounded by plastic ivy vines and holiday fairy lights, dancing to their hearts’ content to hits ranging from Stevie Nicks’ hypnotic husk to David Bowie’s highest note.

Steve cursed himself over and over. He felt like he should have brought a bunch of flowers at his side, or a box of chocolates, or at least a piece of jewelry. He straightened his tie for the umpteenth time before Nancy—dressed in *Cinderella* silver—held his hands down.

“You look fine,” she said with a red smile. “Why are you so nervous, anyway? It’s not like you.”

“Well, do you *see* him anywhere? Shit, this was a bad idea. What if...?”

“Don’t even *think* about finishing that question.”

“I know, I know, I shouldn’t worry so much. I just...”

“Steve?”

Nancy looked past Steve’s shoulder and pointed. When he turned around, every last word that lingered on his lips had all but vanished.

Billy stood by the entrance. His body was as stiff as a soldier’s stance, but his face softened with every step that Steve took towards him. He was almost unrecognizable. Against the navy blue of his suit and the powder blue of his tie, his skin looked like gold. His long blond hair had been tied back, making him appear almost like a prince.

“Hey,” Steve almost choked. “You look great.”

He was almost expecting a witty retort or a haughty agreement. At least a laugh would seem very Billy. Instead, he smiled softly and answered: “So do you.”

Steve laughed and offered his arm. “Dance?”

Billy reluctantly linked his arm with Steve’s. On their way to the dance floor, they could already see faces being pulled and noses being turned up. Steve could only see Nancy’s face smiling at him, as she began to dance with Jonathan. For the first time, he smiled back at them both. Billy’s grip tightened on his arm, almost as if to claim his date as his own, but as they reached their place in the dance floor, he was looking back and forth. No soft hand could ease the shaking in his body.

“People are looking at us.”

Steve smiled weakly and laid a hand on Billy’s cheek. “Then look at me.”

Billy did as he was told. Before long, he seemed to melt into Steve’s touch, the trembling in his body seemed to fade, and they soon began to sway back and forth. Gone were any whispered words and sinister stares. Instead, it was just the two of them in their *Sleeping Beauty* pinks and blues, dancing at prom like any other couple.

It felt strange to stop at “their place” and not have sex. Billy didn’t

seem to mind and neither did Steve. They were just glad to be alone, sitting side-by-side on the hood of his car, and talking about everything and nothing over Chinese take-out. It wasn't a typical end to a prom night, but Steve couldn't have had it any other way, as long as he was with Billy.

"What do you want to do after you graduate?" Steve asked out of nowhere.

Billy looked up to the stars shining through canopy and smiled. "I want to write," he said. His voice was softer than usual. "I always wanted to go down in history like those famous authors, you know? Wilde, Brontë, Forster, those kinds of people. I don't know if I'll ever be *that* good, but I want to find work and earn enough to get an English degree, take a writer's class, and then work my way up from there."

"I remember you saying that you wanted to be a best-selling author." Steve bit his tongue. He didn't want to mention David's name.

"Yeah. Someday. What about you?"

"I got into NYU," Steve blurted out. Billy stopped eating altogether. His smile had fallen flat. "I want to take an English course and then apply for a teacher's college."

"You're going to New York?"

"Yeah, I am, and I want you to come with me."

Billy's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. You told me that you and your ex were gonna run off there, once. Why not run off there with me?"

"Steve..."

"I mean it, Billy. Think about it. By that point, we'll both be legal adults, so we could find an apartment of our own somewhere. I know it's not as open as California, but there's supposed to be a community center for people like us, so we won't be alone, and we could legally live together."

“You wanna *live* together?”

“Yeah, I really do.”

Billy swallowed and stared into the distance. Steve held his breath as he watched him. Before long, he was close to begging him for a simple “yes” or “no.”

“Just you and me,” he finally said, though in little more than a murmur. “New York, a place of our own, no more hiding, no secrets, and no more sneaking around. Sounds good to me.”

Steve jumped to his feet, stood between Billy’s legs, and kissed him so deeply he almost felt lost in a blissful oblivion, almost as if they were the only two people in the world.

Billy was the first to pull back, but still smiled as he reached into his jacket and pulled out his flask. “Shall we seal the deal?”

“I thought you weren’t allowed to drink.”

“Doc gave me the all-clear. Anyway, it’s empty.”

“Then why did...?”

Steve’s voice trailed off. Billy simply traced not the intricate details of the sacred heart, but the clumsy chicken scratches on the back.

“This used to be David’s,” he said. “He gave it to me as a birthday present ‘cause he couldn’t afford anything else. Meant a hell of a lot to him, so imagine how much it meant to me; at the time, anyway.”

Steve wanted to smile, but couldn’t. Instead, he could only watch as Billy took a few steps past him, threw the flask into the air with a vigorous force, and watched it disappear into the night. He stood there for some time, almost as if he had been hypnotized. When Steve stood by his side and placed a hand on his shoulder, he expected to see a tear running down Billy’s cheek, but saw none.

Billy placed his hand on Steve’s. “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

Billy never let go of Steve's hand. Even as they drove home, their fingers entwined tightly together like knots. It was only when they reached the door that he let go, only to have Steve pinned against the wall with a hungry kiss.

"Billy," Steve tried to say between kisses. "Are you sure your doctor gave you the all-clear?"

"Positive. Believe me, I'd know if he didn't. I've wanted you for so long."

As if to prove it, Billy rolled his hips against Steve's, grinding the obvious bulge against his own. Steve responded in kind with one hand lacing through Billy's hair and the other squeezing his ass.

Billy stopped. "I want to do something different this time."

"Oh? What's that?"

Steve thought he was going to explode when he felt that clever mouth on his neck. He could feel Billy's warm breath on his skin as he whispered softly in his ear: "I want you to fuck me."

It was Steve turn to stop. "You mean that? Have you ever...?"

"Yes, I mean that; and no, I haven't. I want you to be my first."

Steve felt an unintentional laugh slip through his lips. "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

"I think I can tell."

"Oh, c'mere!"

Steve pulled Billy in for another burning kiss. Billy's blessed hands were everywhere and his twitching cock rutting against Steve's. Soon, they were stumbling upstairs and into the bedroom, leaving behind a trail of too many clothes, and collapsing onto the bed with their limbs entwined and their cocks rutting against one another.

"God," Billy moaned. "I don't think I've ever been this hard."

“Me neither. Are you—*fuck!*—you sure you want this?”

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life. I want this; want *you*.”

Steve slipped his hand into Billy’s. “You have me.”

Kissing his way down, Steve didn’t want a single inch of Billy’s naked body to go untouched. He wanted to trace wordless adorations on every inch of his skin with his tongue. He wanted to savour each blissed curse and every lewd cry that was pulled from his open mouth. He kissed his neck, his chest, his stomach, his hips, and his thighs until he finally reached his cock. The first kiss on his hard length made his body tremble and his eyes roll into the back of his head. Steve took Billy’s length into his mouth like it was a holy communion.

“Steve!”

Billy was already shaking. Steve could feel his clever fingers raking through his hair, his grip tightening on his scalp with every move he made. He moved slowly and gently at first, savouring the salted beads of pre-come melting onto his tongue and the soft bluntness of velvet on steel nudging at his throat until he quickened his pace and hollowed his cheeks. It wasn’t enough. Steve lowered himself in between Billy’s legs, took one ball into his mouth and then the other, watching how the other boy’s back arched against him. Still, it wasn’t enough. Until...

“Oh, *fuck!*”

Steve had no idea what had possessed him to do it. Perhaps it was an impulse, perhaps he wanted to see how the other boy would react, or perhaps he simply wanted to give what Billy had given to him so many times before. Whatever it was, Steve was gently pressing his lips against Billy’s hole. His tongue soon followed and circled the wrinkled skin until it puckered for him. As he watched his boyfriend—*I guess I can call him that now*—moaned and groaned and wriggled and writhed, Steve was beginning to see why Billy loved doing this to him so much. He was eating his boyfriend out and wasn’t half as disgusting as he thought it was going to be.

“Steve, please!”

Rarely one to be told twice, Steve reached into his bedside table for his hidden bottle of lubricants, coated his first finger, and slowly sank it inside of Billy. His entrance was tense at first, but soon made way for another finger. Steve wasn't quite sure what he was looking for until Billy cried out: “Oh my God!”

“D’you like that?”

“Yeah, I...*fuck*, don’t stop!”

Steve had to drown out Billy’s cries with a kiss. He wondered briefly if his boyfriend would recoil, considering where his mouth had just been, but he did not. Instead, he only deepened the kiss and held him closer than he ever had before. Until he let go.

“Wait,” he said, nearly breathless.

“What is it? Are you hurt? Do you want to stop?”

“God no, that was amazing, but if you keep that up I’m gonna come before you’re inside me.”

Steve smiled and easily inserted a third finger. “Well, we don’t want that, do we?”

Billy returned the smile and shook his head, and winced. “Oh, Steve! Jesus, I’m ready. Please, fuck me!”

“Well, since you said: ‘please.’”

Steve reached again into his bedside table for a condom, rolled it onto his cock, and slowly sank into Billy. No girl had ever felt so tight. He stilled a moment and watched as Billy’s body went stiff beneath him. His eyes were shut and his breath steady.

“Look at me,” Steve said softly. Billy did so. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just...God, you’re so fucking big!”

Steve chuckled lightly and took Billy’s hand, lacing their fingers

together. He began to move slowly, ever so slowly, until he heard quiet cries turn to desperate pleas.

“Oh, Steve! Harder! Faster! Yes! God, please! Fuck, don’t stop!

Steve did exactly as Billy asked and more. Before long, he felt a hand reaching between them and as he hovered above his boyfriend, he felt himself inching closer to the edge, as he watched him touching himself. Smiling, he laid a gentle hand on his boyfriend’s cheek.

“God! You look good like that, Billy.”

“Oh, Steve! Fuck yeah, right there!”

“I’m gonna come. Billy!”

“Fuck, I’m close. Steve!”

Billy came first. Steve watched in awe as ropes of warm semen splashed across chest until his cock softened in his hand. The image alone was enough to trigger his own climax. His body began to feel light, his head spun, and he was almost certain he saw stars.

Steve collapsed by Billy’s side, but still stayed inside of him, twitching with the aftereffects until he softened. They both had to laugh at the feeling until he slowly slipped out and threw the full condom away.

Billy was the first to wrap his arms around Steve, who had to jest: “I thought we agreed: no cuddling.”

“Shut up.”

Steve chuckled and kissed the top of Billy’s head. “So, how was that for a first time?”

“Fucking amazing! I don’t think I’ll be able to walk for a while, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Well, now we’re even. I could barely sit down for a week after the first time you fucked me.”

“You loved it.”

I love you. “Yeah, I did. I still do. I always will.”

Steve didn't remember falling asleep that night. He only remembered waking up to feel a warm body holding his, as the sound of soft snoring buzzed in his ear. Billy almost looked as if he was smiling in his sleep. Steve couldn't help but smile back.

13. One Year Later

Neil Hargrove's death wasn't violent. It wasn't Steve's bat, Eleven's mind, or even Billy's fist that killed him. Instead, it was lung cancer. He was already at the fourth stage when he was diagnosed. Seven long months later, he died in the hospital with no one to say goodbye to. His funeral was a quiet one and very few people cried. Steve held Billy's hand throughout the ceremony nonetheless. He held his hand when the man was buried too. He still held his hand a month or two later, as they paid one last visit to his grave. Billy did not shed a single tear, but his eyes were so dark. He was haunted, that much Steve could tell.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," Billy shrugged. "I just think I should *feel* something, you know? I feel like I should be popping a bottle of champagne and dancing on that grave or take a piss on it or whatever, but there doesn't seem to be any point to it now. I don't feel anything. I'm just, I dunno, numb."

"Well, we don't have any champagne, but there's still some water left from the journey. You could just chug some down and..."

Billy chuckled and shook his head. "Nah, it's not worth it. Anyway, they'll be starting the party now. We don't wanna keep 'em waiting."

Steve smiled, nodded, and tightened his grip on Billy's hand.

"D'you think he'd be proud of me right now?"

Friends don't lie, Steve could almost hear Eleven say. "No."

"Good."

Billy gently kicked a pile of dirt over his father's gravestone and muttered under his breath: "Bye, pops."

Steve wrapped an arm around his boyfriend and kissed his cheek before they made their way back to the Camaro. They were already late, after all.

When they arrived at the cabin, they could already hear the music blasting from outside. Balloons and streamers decorated the front door and were surrounded by fairy lights. Even from the window, they could clearly see the silver and gold banner screaming: *Happy Birthday, Jane!* Eleven had just turned fourteen.

The boys were greeted by cheers, hugs, and kisses when they opened the door. Eleven dashed through the crowd, looking like a little sunflower in her yellow dress, and jumped into Billy's arms, hugging him tightly. Steve laughed, but was amazed at how much bigger she seemed than the last time he had seen her.

"Hey, kid!" the blond nearly choked. "I know it's your big day and all, but I still gotta breathe."

Eleven immediately stepped back, apologizing profusely until Billy pulled her present from inside his jacket.

"Sorry we're late," he said. "We just came a long way, but we hope this'll make it up to you."

"Can I open it?"

Billy nodded. Within seconds, the girl was ripping through the rainbow wrapping paper until in its place was a book: *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Billy placed a hand on Eleven's shoulder. "I know your friends are crazy about this one, so you've probably heard it already, but my mom gave me this book for my birthday once. I thought you might appreciate it. Happy Birthday, kid."

Eleven looked to the older boy with bright eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck. Billy held her back and kissed her cheek.

"Thank you!" she said.

Steve could only watch with the biggest grin on his face.

"What's that look for?" Billy asked, once Eleven had run back to her friends.

“Nothing. I just never thought I’d see you turn into such a big softie, that’s all.”

“Softie, eh? If that’s gonna be my new nickname, I resent that.”

Steve snickered and wrapped an arm around Billy’s waist. “I think you know what your nickname is, Mr. Hard...”

“Stefano, darling!”

Maria approached the boys and kissed them both. She was particularly affectionate towards Billy, for which Steve could not have been more grateful. From the day they made their relationship official, Maria treated Billy as if she were one of his own. Steve wasn’t sure if it was out of sympathy or love, but was grateful nonetheless. Billy certainly seemed grateful, if it meant being spoiled rotten with all the affection he’d been showered in.

“How is New York?” she asked. “Are you two settling in nicely? Have you been making any friends? What is university like? Where are you working?”

“Easy, mama, we just got back!”

Billy just laughed. “We’re doing fine, Maria. New York is huge, the apartment’s nice, the people are great, we’ve both been working hard, and it’s good to see you.”

“Steve!” chimed another voice. Nancy followed soon after and greeted Steve with a hug. Billy responded by holding Steve closer to his side. This had become a habit of his and one that no one dared question. It wasn’t because he hated her. Steve knew that and Nancy knew that.

“We’ve missed you,” Nancy beamed. “How are you guys?”

Steve looked to Billy and smiled. “We’re amazing.”

The rest of the evening may well have been a string of stories and jokes about their adventures and misadventures in New York. Steve told her about how their first night in their new apartment was spent in a sleeping bag, since they had no furniture; how Billy had found

work waiting tables and sometimes wrote stories of the crazy, stupid, wonderful people he'd served; how Steve was so busy with university that he once fell asleep on his mountain of homework, only to wake up with a fresh cup of coffee from his boyfriend.

Of course, he didn't tell his friends *everything*. Neither of them did. They didn't tell anyone about how Billy still had nightmares of his father and had to be held in order to calm down, or how Steve still struggled with school to the point that he was losing sleep, or even how their place had once been vandalized with graffiti that read: "Faggots!" They certainly didn't talk of how they lived on little else but Chinese take-out, read together at night, played street basketball on weekends, and settled every argument with some good old fashioned make-up sex.

Steve must have slipped the subject of their relationship into every conversation. He couldn't help it. He was happy. He was in love. He wanted people to know that.

When the party was nearly over and the rest of the crew were engaged in their own games, Steve nearly choked on his drink when he felt a tug on his jacket. Before he could even speak, he felt himself being thrown into a closet. Billy slammed the door shut and kissed him.

"Seriously?" he chuckled, as he felt Billy's warm mouth trailing down his neck. "We're at a kid's birthday party!"

"I know. I just wanted a moment alone with you."

"You couldn't wait 'til we got home?"

"For another hour? I don't think so. Besides, I just wanted a moment. I was just talking to your mom."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "You felt the need to drag me into a closet to tell me this?"

"No, that's not what I wanted to tell you."

"Then, what did you want to tell me?"

Billy smiled and bit his lip before leaning into one more kiss before whispering against Steve's lips: "Ti amo."

Steve's eyes snapped open. Even with the over-exaggerated accent and obvious mispronunciation, those two little big words echoed in his head. They were so simple and yet they sounded like the sweetest song to him. He couldn't control the butterflies in his stomach or the smile on his face. All he could do was grab Billy by the waist and kiss him deeply.

"I love you too."